

**Hurting and Hiding: The Lived Experiences of  
Black Men Struggling with Same-Sex Attraction  
and Adherence to the Teachings and Beliefs of  
UK Black Majority Churches.**

*Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the  
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## **Abstract**

Black Majority Churches (BMC) play a central role in the lives of Black people, informing culture and community. Within the BMC the issues of sexuality and in particular homosexuality are rarely spoken of. However, doctrines in regards to homosexuality have been conveyed in a seemingly homophobic manner, hence individuals experiencing same-sex attraction (SSA) in BMCs have remained silent and unsupported. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of five Black Men struggling with SSA and adhering to the teachings of the BMC. The study posed the question, 'How do Black men struggling with SSA and the teachings of BMCs perceive and describe their lived experiences?'

Data for the study was collected primarily through individual interviews conducted with each participant. The transcripts were analysed using Colazzi's method for analysing data and two major themes emerged: unfairness and needing support.

Discussions of the participants lives indicated that they felt compelled to keep their SSA hidden to avoid stigmatisation, discrimination, isolation and rejection. Moreover, they were also discomforted by the ongoing conflict between their homoerotic feelings and their religious beliefs. Additional data resulting from the questionnaires completed by seventeen Black ministers and leaders of BMCS, provided understanding of the context in which the participants were struggling.

The findings suggest that there is a lack of a pastoral care approach for persons experiencing SSA in BMCS and recommends that such an approach is developed. Importantly, this study gives voice to Black men with SSA hurting and hiding in BMCS and has the potential to contribute to the resources required by anyone wanting to find out more about this experience and initiate further research.

## Summary of Portfolio

The desire to maintain relevance, effectiveness in ministry, a penchant for learning and improving knowledge, led to me successfully completing the Masters in Applied Theology and embarking on the Doctor of Ministry (DMin). The various modules in the DMin programme reinforced and provided for personal growth, and further augmentation of my ministry, and facilitated the in-depth exploration of an area of ministry and pastoral care that is of significant interest to me.

My chapter, 'Preaching in the Black Church', in, *The Future of Preaching*,<sup>1</sup> was accepted for the Publishable Article Module. Writing this caused me to reflect critically and theologically upon issues in Black Majority Churches (BMCs), my placement context. One such issue was brought to me by a young man experiencing same-sex attraction and attending a BMC. He was in need of support and frustrated as he was unable to approach the church. His predicament and the needs of others like him eventually gave birth to the research topic.

The Literature Review Module contributed to the developing and sharpening of my research and analytical skills and my ability to critically engage with the ideas and theoretical concepts posed by different authors. I have learned to explore and engage with issues from different perspectives and to recognize biases and presuppositions in my own conceptual analyses. The literature searches also allowed for the identification and gathering of material that was related and valuable to my research, and further emphasised a field in which research and practice might yield new information and insights.

Similarly, the Research Proposal Module enabled me to set the research in its context, describe a research problem and formulate the research question on which to base my proposal. I also gained understanding of the various methodologies, methods and techniques necessary for doing social science and humanities research. Through the knowledge acquired I was able to determine the methodology and methods that were best suited for my study. Subsequently, this resulted in the successful compilation of a research proposal which was to the appropriate standard for the DMin programme.

Conclusively, this was a very profitable learning experience. The DMin Research Workshops provided face to face interactions with peers and tutors. Furthermore, they afforded the space to present research ideas, to receive and respond to feedback, brainstorm and problem solve. The understanding and confidence gained in the DMin programme have proven advantageous to the completion and development of my research project.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruthlyn Bradshaw, 'The Black Church' in *The Future of Preaching*, ed. by Geoffrey Stevenson (London: SCM Press, 2010), 47-68.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to the five Black men who trusted me and candidly shared their personal stories. There are not enough words for me to express my gratitude and appreciation. Although they must remain anonymous they are no longer silent!

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my highest praise is to God for sustaining and guiding me through this journey.

I would like to extend sincere thanks to several people for their support, assistance and encouragement.

A special thanks goes to my supervisors, Dr Graham Watts, Dr Tony Rich and Dr Paul Middleton. Their advice, guidance and encouragement have been invaluable. Heartfelt thanks go to Dr Joshua Searle and Dr Steve Latham for support and guidance.

I owe particular gratitude to the five participants who so willingly agreed to participate in the study, and the seventeen ministers and leaders who completed questionnaires. This would not have been possible without them. I am grateful to Dr Peter Stevenson for encouraging me to pursue the Doctorate in Ministry. His belief in my ability and suitability was a great source of motivation.

I would also like to thank Dr Kwamen Kubweza, my brother, for being a great role model as well as for his encouragement and for proof reading my thesis.

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I wish to extend thanks to both Hackney New Life Assembly and Nottingham New Life Assembly, the two congregations I pastor. I am indeed grateful for their prayer, patience and consideration during this time.

My heart felt thanks to Dolly London and family for encouragement, concern and prayer support; to Datha Blackwood for support and encouragement; to Pastor Lovel Bent for his support and prayers; to Dolly McPherson Harris for her contribution in proof reading and encouragement; Sonia Hutchinson and Jenise Jarvis for encouragement, prayer and personal support. You have all been great support systems. I am forever grateful and pleased to have you as friends and family.

My amazing husband Ishmael and children deserve my deepest thank you for their tireless support, love, longsuffering, prayers, and enduring the pain with me. They kept me afloat by constantly repeating 'You can do it' and **I have!**

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## **Abbreviations**

BMC	Black Majority Church
NIV	New International Version
SSA	Same-sex Attraction
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

This study seeks to explore and gain a deeper understanding of how Black men struggling<sup>2</sup> with same-sex attraction (SSA)<sup>3</sup> and the teachings of Black Majority Churches (BMCs)<sup>4</sup> in the United Kingdom (UK), perceive and make meaning of their experiences. To get a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, it is important to note that the men in this study, experiencing SSA, are resolved to uphold their Christian principles, live chaste lives and not take on a gay identity.

### **Background of the Study**

One evening, a very agitated Black man in his late twenties visited me at home. The conversation began with him suddenly and emotively spurting out, ‘the church has failed me!’ Apparently, in his early teens he became aware of his sexual feelings for men and since then he has been confused, horrified and disgusted by what he termed, ‘forbidden and unthinkable feelings.’ Raised and nurtured in the BMC, he accepted the teaching that homosexuality was wrong and has been wrestling for years with homoerotic desires and his resolve not to give expression to them. He was constantly harassed by gay friends encouraging him to take on a gay identity and stop living a life of pretence. He mentioned that the pressure with homosexual feelings, Christian beliefs and the advice from his gay friends was so intense that he felt as if he was on the verge of losing his mind so he came that evening seeking help.

His ‘spiritual dilemma,’ as he called it, was intensified by the fact that he needed help but could not turn to his church. He was afraid to disclose his same-sex attraction to

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<sup>2</sup> The sense of struggle is not simply internal, but involves the tension between their same-sex attraction and the teaching and approach taken by their churches.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper, same-sex attraction when used in reference to the participants refers to them having sexual attractions and feelings towards a member of the same sex, but they do not identify as being gay.

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of the research, Black Majority Churches (BMCs) in the UK refers to those churches in the UK that are led by Black leaders with the majority of the following being Africans, African-Caribbean and others who define themselves as being Black.

his church leaders or anyone else in his church because he felt it would be met with severe disapproval, ostracism and talk of demon possession. He had witnessed the Black churches' hostility, judgemental and unsupportive attitude when dealing with issues in regard to homosexuality. His fears were further intensified by two statements which he had recently heard in his church: 'Real Christian men do not have sexual feelings for other men' and 'I hope the day would never come when a Black man in my church has the guts to declare that he is gay.' Looking me straight in the eyes, the young man asked, 'How will guys like me ever get help in Black churches?'

Being a pastor of BMCs for over thirty years did not prepare me for this. Homosexual issues were never discussed and I felt out of my depth and genuinely at a loss as to the type of support that he needed or expected. I turned to several Black male pastors of BMCs for advice and the following were some of the responses and suggestions they gave to me:

- Pray and fast with him until he is set free.
- He has a demon that needs to be cast out.
- Wow, this is a big one, just tell him that Black men don't love men, it is not a thing that we do.
- I really hope there is no one like him coming to my church.
- Try and make the young man understand that a man loving another man is one of the worst sins that he could commit.
- Show him in scripture where God destroyed a whole city for that.
- This is bad, we can't afford for people to know that Black men are having feelings for men in our churches.
- I never thought the day would come when we would have to deal with this sort of problem in our churches, well, not Black churches anyway.
- There is never smoke without fire, if he feels it he must be doing it.
- When you find out what to do, be sure to let me know in case I ever have to deal with anything like this.

I was surprised at the apparent lack of an appropriate pastoral care approach in BMCs for supporting individuals experiencing conflict between their SSA and religious beliefs. My lack of knowledge regarding this issue, my awareness of a lack in BMCs, and the young man enquiring how guys like him will ever get help in Black churches, were reasons that motivated the interest in undertaking this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Homosexuality, with all its connotations, still evokes emotions, questions and debates within the Church today. Numerous church traditions have been engaging with this divisive and controversial issue. Surprisingly, even with the passing of laws legalising same-sex marriage in the UK, BMCs in the UK have managed to absent themselves from the debate. They have remained particularly closed and polarised in their views concerning homosexuality. Sexuality and more specifically, homosexuality are still to some extent, treated as taboo subjects within some BMCs. This is unfortunate because Black churches are still significantly influencing the values and social views of Black people. The Black community often takes its cue from the Black church.

Homosexuality is not a new phenomenon in Black churches. It has been there a long time, albeit cloaked in denial, hypocrisy and the 'don't ask don't tell' disguise.<sup>5</sup> There are individuals with SSA in BMC congregations who reject the teachings of their church and self-identify as gay. However, there are others who have decided against integrating SSA into a gay identity. They believe that homoerotic sexual behaviours conflict with God's plan for their lives and the tenets of the church. This group of people have remained hidden in churches, silently wrestling with internal conflicting homoerotic feelings, Black cultural expectations and the homophobic attitude that exist in BMCs. They are endeavouring to live chaste lives but are afraid to share that they are experiencing SSA, as it may mean facing great stigma, rejection and ridicule

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<sup>5</sup> Horace Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbian and Gays in Black Churches* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006), p.111. Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: Aids and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 285.

in the church. The study focuses its attention on exploring the lived experiences of this population that is overlooked by the church and underrepresented in the literature.

In an article published in 2012, a Black Christian man experiencing SSA expressed that Black Christians in the BMCs, experiencing same-sex attraction, choose either to become militant gays, stay silent or commit suicide.<sup>6</sup> The homophobic attitude prevalent in the Black church<sup>7</sup> is a deterrent to anyone within that context seeking help with issues connected to homosexuality. Black men experiencing SSA are not likely to distance themselves from church;<sup>8</sup> therefore it is imperative that BMCs consider how they might support them.

Individuals experiencing SSA are encouraged by the counselling profession, the gay community and the wider society to integrate the attraction into a gay identity and give expressions to those attractions. However, the men in the study are determined, despite their homoerotic feelings, to uphold the teachings of the church and abide by their convictions.

### **Purpose of Study**

This study seeks to understand how Black men perceive and describe their lived experiences of struggling with same-sex attraction and the teachings and beliefs of BMCs in the UK. One hopes that by understanding their experiences and seeking to evaluate and make sense of them theologically, a pastoral care strategy can be subsequently developed for addressing their needs.

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<sup>6</sup> True Freedom Trust, 'One Man's Experience in a Black Church', <<http://truefreedomtrust.co.uk/node/711>> [Accessed 19 -05-2012].

<sup>7</sup> Griffin, p. x. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p.88.

<sup>8</sup> Richard N. Pitt, "Killing the Messenger": Religious Black Gay Men's Neutralization of Anti-Gay Religious Messages', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49 (2010) 56–72 (p. 57), EBSCOhost <<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=3bd7f516-47b8-490a-8128-6fa24b1d7973%40sessionmgr110&hid=105>> [Accessed 9 February 2013].

## **Significance of the Study**

Studies on Homosexuality within the Black church are quite scarce. What's more, studies regarding young men struggling with SSA and wanting to uphold the teachings of the Black church are exceptionally rare. Surprisingly, at the time of conducting this study and presenting this thesis, there are no known studies originating within the United Kingdom or on BMCs and young Black men within the UK.

This study endeavours to firstly provide a comprehensive phenomenological study to go towards addressing the present gap in the literature in the UK.

Secondly, this study aims to catalyse further discussion and provide a resource for future studies into this topic.

Consisting of a comprehensive literature review and primary study, this thesis will also contribute to the resources required by those keen to find out more about young Black men struggling with SSA and the teachings of their BMCs. This can be useful to ministers who want a further understanding into this topic, ministers and leaders who are currently training and or academics pursuing this line of study. Importantly, it is a useful study beneficial to the Church and specifically the Black church, as it allows the accounts of these men to be heard. This will also be useful in addressing some of the misconceptions held for many years.

Moreover, this study can also be useful to young Black men struggling with SSA, as it shows that there are studies which they can relate to. It may also encourage them to follow up on seeking counsel. Lastly this study endeavours to initialise dialogue on the necessity of a pastoral care framework for those struggling with SSA within the BMC. Whilst this study is small, it is in no way suggested that this is used in isolation to establish such a response but will contribute to the discussion.

### **Primary Research Question**

The following question provides the framework for this study: How do Black men struggling with same-sex attraction and the teachings of Black Majority Churches perceive and describe their lived experiences?

The next chapter will provide a review and discussion of the available literature in relation to this area of research.



## Chapter Two: Review of Literature

### Introduction

Homosexuality is one of the most contentious and challenging subjects being currently discussed. Religious bodies and society at large are wrestling with questions posed by debates, laws, public opinion and the Scriptures. Attempts at addressing the issue of homosexuality have left churches divided and numerous issues unresolved.

Homosexuality is a particularly controversial issue for the Black church. Sexuality and more so homosexuality, are rarely if ever addressed in the Black church.<sup>9</sup> This literature review hopes to provide a context for exploring and understanding the lived experience of Black men in Black churches struggling with SSA and their desire to comply with their church's teachings regarding homosexuality.

The following will be discussed: Black people and religion; the Black church; the Black church and homosexuality; Homophobia and the Black church; Internalised homophobia; Cognitive Dissonance and Black men and Issues of masculinity. This review will also highlight the overall lack of research on this subject and reinforce the need for this study.

The majority of the works cited in this chapter has been conducted in the United States of America (USA). This is due to a complete lack of known resources within the United Kingdom (UK) on the Black church and homosexuality. Although this is the case the context and culture can be very much applicable to those in the UK. The Black church wherever it is located has similar emphasis, distinguishing characteristics and is rooted in the Black experience.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Elijah G. Ward, 'Homophobia, Hypermasculinity and the US Black Church', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 7 (2005), 493-504 (p. 497) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691050500151248>> [Accessed 17 February 2013]. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Kalilombe, 'Black Christianity in Britain', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 20 (1997), 306-324 (p.314) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1997.9993963>> [Accessed 10 September 2015].

## Black People and Religion

Black people regard religion and religious practices as essential aspects of their lives and would find it extremely difficult to exist without them.<sup>11</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, propose that 'A good way to understand a people is to study their religion, for religion is addressed to that most sacred schedule of values around which the expression and the meaning of life tends to coalesce.'<sup>12</sup> A number of works confirm the importance and centrality of religion in Black culture and in Black lives.<sup>13</sup> Church affiliation 'is often a significant element of the social lives and networks of blacks', irrespective of their socioeconomic status.<sup>14</sup> Jones' article revealed that approximately sixty-one percent of Black people in the USA frequently attend religious services and are members of Christian churches.<sup>15</sup> In the United Kingdom, Black Majority Churches are among the largest and fastest growing churches and it is estimated that there are over 4,000 congregations.<sup>16</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya's claim that 'much of black culture is heavily indebted to the black religious tradition,'<sup>17</sup> highlights the magnitude of the church's influence on shaping the Black community's worldview and values. It is important that this study takes religion and church affiliation into consideration when examining Black people's ideas and beliefs concerning moral issues such as homosexuality.

Religious influence and its effect often begin early in life. Black children are exposed to religion and usually grow up embracing and accepting it as a significant and

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<sup>11</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1989), p. 2. Andrew Billingsley, *Mighty Like a River: The Black Church and Social Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8. Griffin, p. 48. Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p.27.

<sup>12</sup> C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (London: Duke University Press, 1990), p. xi.

<sup>13</sup> Paris, p. 27. Griffin, p. 48. Lincoln and Mamiya, p.10.

<sup>14</sup> Ward, p. 494.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence N. Jones, 'The Black Churches: A New Agenda', in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. by Milton C. Sernett, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Durham and London: Duke university Press, 1999), 580 -589 (p. 585).

<sup>16</sup> Babatunde Adedibu, *Coat of Many Colours: The Origin, Growth, Distinctiveness and Contributions of Black Majority Churches to British Christianity* (Gloucester: Wisdom Summit, 2012), p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 8.

important part of their lives.<sup>18</sup> Ward best explains the potent and lasting influence of religion on Black lives when he said, 'even if as adults they no longer embrace the church or religious principles, many blacks have been profoundly influenced by the church ideology and imagery with which they were raised, and this continues to influence their later beliefs and practices.'<sup>19</sup>

Over the years Black people have relied on religion as a coping and survival method.<sup>20</sup> Their experiences of slavery and racism reinforced their need for religious stability and continuity and motivated the establishment of Black churches in the USA and BMCs in the UK. It is the opinion of Black British theologian Anthony Reddie that if Black people in the African Diaspora were not wise enough to have formed churches and ecclesiastical spaces for themselves, they probably would not have survived.<sup>21</sup>

## **The Black Church**

### ***What is the Black Church?***

Definition is a major difficulty when talking about the Black church. Black British theologian Robert Beckford explains that 'definitions are not easy because no one definition can fully encompass the complexity of what is being described.'<sup>22</sup> There is no Black church in the conventional understanding of the term as it does not denote one particular subset of church.<sup>23</sup> Douglas and Hopson categorises it as a 'multitudinous community of churches, which are diversified by origin, denomination, doctrine, worshipping culture, spiritual expression, class, size, and other less-obvious factors.'<sup>24</sup> There are existing differences, but despite these, Black

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<sup>18</sup> Keith Boykin, *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 126.

<sup>19</sup> Ward, p. 494.

<sup>20</sup> Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: A Multisystems Approach* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989), p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony G. Reddie, *Working Against the Grain: Re-imagining Black Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Routledge 2008), p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (Great Britain: SPCK, 2000), p.1.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, p.582.

<sup>24</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas and Ronald E. Hopson, 'Understanding the Black Church: The Dynamics of Change', *Journal of Religious Thought*, 56 (2001), 95-103 (p. 95), in ATLA Religion Database with

churches are united by culture, beliefs, a common history of struggle, rejection, exclusion, slavery, racism and their significance in the lives of Black people.<sup>25</sup> The term Black Church is therefore used to encapsulate the pluralism of all the predominantly Black Christian congregations and presents them as one organisation.

Throughout this thesis, the term Black church, widely used in the USA and Black Majority Church<sup>26</sup> commonly used in the UK, are used interchangeably. Either term refers to churches that are led by Black leaders with the majority of the congregations being Africans, African-Americans, African-Caribbean, Black British and other people who define themselves as Black.

### **The Evolution of Black Churches**

This particular Christian form known as the Black church originated in the USA during the slave era when enslaved Africans rejected and rebelled against the type of Christianity that their enslavers offered them.<sup>27</sup> They resisted the religion of their oppressors and the theology of oppression which suggested that God sanctioned slavery and was in favour of the dehumanisation of Black people.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, Black people believing that God was on their side, that he affirmed their “Blackness,” established their own brand of churches and chose to promote a theology that was liberating, uplifting and empowering.<sup>29</sup> It was the need for a particular type of worship, their desire to fulfil spiritual and cultural needs, racism, prejudice and

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ATLA Serials <<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=9c1f407b-0e83-49cd-ac7f-8db4788a6aa7%40sessionmgr4001&vid=6&hid=4209EBSCOhost>> [Accessed 15 November 2014].

<sup>25</sup> Allison Calhoun-Brown, ‘Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement’, *Political Science and Politics*, 33 (2000), 168-174 (p. 169) <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=10490965%28200006%2933%3A2%3C168%3AUTRTBC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>> [Accessed 1 November 2014]. Louis-Charles Harvey, ‘From Rejection to Liberation: The Development of the Black Church in Great Britain and the United States’, *International Review Of Mission*, 77 (1988) 67-77 (p.69), in *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000799232&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 9 March 2014]. Douglas and Hopson, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Sturge, *Look What the Lord Has Done: An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain* (London: Scripture Union, 2005), p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas and Hopson, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p.29.

exclusions from the traditional churches, that contributed to the development of BMCs in the UK.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Black Church and Black Community**

The Black church is one of the most significant and stable institutions in the Black community and is 'distinguished by the pervasive role that it plays in the lives of Black people.'<sup>31</sup> The Black church was and still remains one of the few places that belongs exclusively to and is entirely controlled by the Black community.<sup>32</sup> It provided Black people with a sense of well-being and reflected their social evolution by affording them leadership experience and development as well as opportunities for intellectual and social advancement.<sup>33</sup> The Bible was the book from which a number of Black people first learned to read and write.<sup>34</sup>

Historically, Black churches served as spiritual warehouses, social refuges, information centres and advocated for the rights of Black people.<sup>35</sup> This multifunctional institution, described as 'enormously resourceful and potent agents of social reform,'<sup>36</sup> initiated civil rights movements and social institutions.<sup>37</sup> The Black church's influence in shaping public opinion, defining Black people's lives, values, political and social views has been well documented by authors such as Billingsley, Bradshaw, Boykin, Perry, Lincoln and Mamiya.<sup>38</sup> The works of authors previously

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<sup>30</sup> Sturge, p.87. Louis-Charles Harvey, (pp.73-74).

<sup>31</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 382.

<sup>32</sup> Boyd-Franklin, *A Multisystems Approach*, p. 81. Dwight Perry, *Breaking Down Barriers: A Black Evangelist Explains The Black Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), p. 106.

<sup>33</sup> Reginald F. Davis, *The Black Church: Relevant or Irrelevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing INC, 2010), p.16. Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African American Experience*, 2nd edn (New York: Guilford Press, 2003), p. 128.

<sup>34</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, p.251. Billingsley, p.11.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Joseph Taylor, Michael C. Thornton and Linda M. Chatters, 'Black Americans' Perceptions of the Sociohistorical Role of the Church,' *Journal of Black Studies*, 18 (1987), 123-138 (p.123) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784547>> [Accessed: 28 October 2014]. Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 272. Cohen, p. 276.

<sup>36</sup> Billingsley, p. 185.

<sup>37</sup> Calhoun-Brown, p. 169.

<sup>38</sup> Billingsley, p. 185. Ruthlyn Bradshaw, 'Preaching in the Black Church', in *The Future of Preaching*, ed. by Geoffrey Stevenson (London: SCM Press, 2010), 47-68 (pp. 48-49). Boykin, p. 124. Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 9. Perry, p. 33.

mentioned supports other scholarship that attest to the close relationship shared between the Black church and Black community. It is unlikely to find a Black community that does not have the institutional presence of a Black church. Black churches are as critical to the survival of Black people today as they have been in the past.<sup>39</sup> It is within the sanctuary of the Black church that Black people have found the support and strength needed to survive the numerous oppressions that they encounter.<sup>40</sup>

However, while studies referenced earlier suggest that the Black church effectively fought against oppression, injustice and inequality, there are studies that reprimand the church for inconsistent and contradictory behaviour.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, after championing the cause for alienated, abused and oppressed Black people, it is alleged that Black churches are now subjecting homosexuals to subjugations similar to what they protested against.<sup>42</sup> Douglas, Hopson and Farajaje-Jones purport that although the church still fights for racial justice, it is at the same time oppressing homosexuals.<sup>43</sup> Moreover Griffin implies that Black churches are using the Bible to afflict homosexuals and to sanction the discrimination that is evident in their treatment of heterosexual and gay congregants.<sup>44</sup> Gay Black men in Wilson and Miller's study refer to the Black church as one of the most oppressive of non-gay friendly environments.<sup>45</sup> These studies have indicated that the Black church's attitude to one kind of oppression does not guarantee sensitivity to another.

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<sup>39</sup> Jones, p. 588.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader* (New York, Basic Civitas Books, 2004), p. 227.

<sup>41</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 38.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996), p.105. Griffin, p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas and Hopson, p. 102. Elias Farajaje-Jones, 'Breaking silence: Toward an In-the-life Theology', in *Black Theology: A Documentary History: Volume Two 1980 -1992*, ed. by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 139-160 (p. 146).

<sup>44</sup> Griffin, p.2.

<sup>45</sup> Bianca Della, Marie Wilson and Robin Lin Miller, 'Strategies for Managing Heterosexism Used Among African American Gay and Bisexual Men', *Journal of Black Psychology*, 28 (2002), 371-391 (p. 382) <<http://jbp.sagepub.com/content/28/4/371>> [Accessed 28 November 2014].

The Black church's reluctance in responding to the HIV/AIDS epidemic supports the assumption that the Black church is not playing a vital role in helping to combat this social problem that is overwhelmingly affecting a large percentage of the Black population. The literature suggests that the Black church's inhibition to respond to the crises is seemingly due to the association between HIV/AIDS and homosexuality.<sup>46</sup> There are those who believe that the HIV/AIDS virus is transmitted through immoral behaviour and might be God's punishment for sinful sexual conduct.<sup>47</sup> Black churches, as Barnes indicates, are caught in a dialectical tension concerning the HIV/AIDS issue. While Black churches are willing to fulfil their Christian duty and serve the community in this aspect, they do not want their support to be seen as embracing homosexuality or violating Christian tenets.<sup>48</sup>

These perceptions are important as the Black church holds a uniquely influential position within the Black community. Black society's ideologies and responses to issues such as homosexuality, are frequently guided by the Black church's beliefs. Shaw and McDaniel, avow that 'religion is clearly the major determinant of black attitudes toward homosexuality.'<sup>49</sup> It is likely that an examination of the Black church's behaviour and approach to homosexuality will provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of Black men experiencing SSA in Black churches.

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<sup>46</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Gregory B. Lewis, 'Black -White Differences in Attitudes Toward Homosexuality and Gay Rights', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 67 (2003), 59-78, (p.75), in *SocINDEX with Full Text*, EBSCOhost <<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=7&sid=8511a5c8-f7df-4b04-9ae0-3392a6d05c5b%40sessionmgr4002&hid=4106>> [Accessed 27 November 2014]. Cohen, p.285. Delroy Constantine-Simms, 'Is Homosexuality the Greatest Taboo?', in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. by Delroy Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2000), 76-87 (p. 79). Sandra L. Barnes, 'The Influence of Black Church Culture: How Black Church Leaders Frame the HIV/AIDS Discourse', *Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue*, (2009) 65-84 (p.69) <<http://irdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Barnes-JIRD-Oct-2009.pdf>> [Accessed 20 October 2014].

<sup>48</sup> Barnes, 'The Influence of Black Church Culture', p. 65.

<sup>49</sup> Todd C. Shaw and Eric L. McDaniel, "'Whosoever Will': Black Theology, Homosexuality and the Black Political Church,' in *The Expanding Boundaries of Black Politics: The National Political Science Review*, 11, ed. by Georgia A. Persons, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 137- 155 (p. 138).

## **The Black Church and Homosexuality**

Literature substantiates that Black attitudes to homosexuality relates to and are deeply rooted in religion and religious beliefs.<sup>50</sup> In Lewis' study, the condemnation of homosexuality was most prominent among "born-again" Protestants who regularly attended religious services, prayed frequently and claimed religion as an essential part of their lives. He proposed that Blacks are substantially more religious, more likely to be fundamental Protestants and their disapproval of homosexuality is more intense and stronger than Whites.<sup>51</sup>

Scholarship clearly acknowledges the Black church's condemnation and strong doctrinal position against both homosexuality and homosexual acts.<sup>52</sup> Black churches tend to adhere to a common position with the stance that homosexuality is sinful, immoral, abominable and unnatural.<sup>53</sup> Some Black churches also believe and are proponents of the spiritual theory that homosexuality is caused by demonic spirits and individuals experiencing homosexual impulses and attractions are demon possessed.<sup>54</sup> Black churches holding this belief often resort to exorcism (casting out of the demon) as the solution or remedy to this perceived spiritual dilemma.

## **The Bible and Homosexuality in the Black Churches**

The Bible plays a pivotal role in the lives of Black people. Black peoples' love for the Bible stems from the fact that they see similarities in the biblical stories that resonate

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<sup>50</sup> Lewis, p. 66. Pitt, pp. 39, 40. Juan Battle and Anthony J. Lemelle Jr., 'Gender Differences in African American Attitudes Toward Gay Males', *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 26 (2002) 134-139 (p. 137), in *SocINDEX with Full Text*, EBSCOhost <<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=8511a5c8-f7df-4b04-9ae0-3392a6d05c5b%40sessionmgr4002&hid=4106>> [Accessed 12 December 2015].

<sup>51</sup> Lewis, p.66.

<sup>52</sup> Cohen, p. 284. Dyson, p.105. Ward, p. 494.

<sup>53</sup> Boykin, p.96.

<sup>54</sup> Joe Dallas, 'Theories of Origin, Part 2: Developmental, Spiritual, and Interactive Theories', in *The Complete Christian Guide to Understanding Homosexuality: A Biblical and Compassionate Response to Same-Sex Attraction*, ed. by Joe Dallas and Nancy Heche, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2010), 197-216 (p. 207).



with their own experiences and meet their historical needs.<sup>55</sup> For instance, the enslavement and deliverance of the Israelites bears resemblance to the enslavement of Black people and their subsequent emancipation. Their association with the events in the Bible and their love for a powerful liberating God has led to a fundamental acceptance of the Bible as the “rule book” for Black Christian living.<sup>56</sup> They believe the Bible to be God’s words and acknowledge that there are certain aspects, such as heterosexual marriage, that remains absolute and unchangeable while others like dress code and women in ministry could be updated as times changed. Reddie posits the viewpoint that ‘Black people can read against the text and with it, depending upon how the text aligns itself’ with their thinking.<sup>57</sup>

The Bible is the major authority that informs and influences the Black church’s theological stance on moral issues such as homosexuality. Studies have identified the pervasive influence that biblical interpretation has on Black people’s beliefs and attitude towards homosexuality. Their tendency to accept and interpret the Bible literally is documented in the Pew study carried out in 2008, which found that 55% of Black Americans believe that religious scriptures should be interpreted literally.<sup>58</sup> Scriptural interpretations play a seminal part in providing meaning and ethical guidelines for one’s life, and it impacts the way certain issues are viewed or perceived. The Black churches’ interpretation of scripture references used to justify their position against homosexuality has had a direct sway on the position Black people hold regarding it.<sup>59</sup>

The majority of Black churches believe biblical teachings clearly indicate that homosexuality is prohibited by God.<sup>60</sup> However, scholars such as Boswell, Griffin and

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<sup>55</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 55.

<sup>56</sup> Sandra L. Barnes, ‘To Welcome or Affirm: Black Clergy Views About Homosexuality, Inclusivity, and Church Leadership’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 60 (2013), 1409–1433, (p. 1411) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.819204>> [Accessed 30 October 2014].

<sup>57</sup> Reddie, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup> Pew Research Center, *A Religious Portrait of African-Americans, Religion & Public Life* (2009) <<http://pewforum.org/A-Religious-Portrait-of-African-Americans.aspx>> [Accessed 12 December 2014].

<sup>59</sup> Barnes, ‘The Influence of Black Church Culture’, p. 69. Ward, p. 495.

<sup>60</sup> Barnes, ‘The Influence of Black Church Culture’, p. 69. Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the*

Helminiak, challenge and refute the Black churches' understanding and interpretation of the biblical texts often cited against the practice of homosexuality, and they offer different interpretations of them. For instance, they advocate that the Black churches' interpretation of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis chapter nineteen, identifies homosexuality as the conduct that is being condemned when in fact, it is inhospitality and not homosexuality as they propose.<sup>61</sup>

Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas shares similar sentiment with the above mentioned scholars, in that she too claims that the meanings attributed to the biblical texts used against homosexuality are generally misunderstood and distorted. She argues that Black people have used the Bible as a sacred canopy over their views about homosexuality, but 'the Bible does not present a clear position on homosexuality as is often self-righteously asserted.'<sup>62</sup> In her opinion, the Bible is an inadequate source when dealing with homosexuality issues.

Conversely, Grenz examining the same biblical texts and drawing on the exegetical works of several theologians found that the new insights offered by recent scholarship did not provide enough evidence to warrant the rejection of traditional views. Grenz is consistent in his defence of traditional beliefs that homosexual acts are wrong and same-sex relationships are not what God intends for human sexuality.<sup>63</sup> Grenz takes the view that biblical texts and authority remain relevant in a contemporary society.<sup>64</sup> His historical survey of the church's teaching, showed a firmly established condemnation of homosexual behaviour which did not waver throughout the centuries.<sup>65</sup> He argues that scholars who propose that the church

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*Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p.108.

<sup>61</sup> John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 93. Griffin, p. 69. Daniel A. Helminiak, *What the Bible Really say About Homosexuality* (New Mexico: Alamo Square Press, 2000), Amazon Kindle e-book (chapter3, para. 3, location 671).

<sup>62</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p.90.

<sup>63</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 35-63.

<sup>64</sup> Grenz, p.89.

<sup>65</sup> Grenz, p. 80.

should accept same-sex relationships have yet to produce sufficient basis for revising the traditional beliefs and position that condemns homosexual conduct, seemingly finding the traditional views more exegetically sound.

Douglas points out that people approach scripture using different hermeneutical lenses and often assign meanings that endorse cultural views and practices. White slaveholders, for instance, interpreted the Bible in a way that exploited, suppressed and suggested to Black people that they were divinely cursed and slavery was what God had ordained for them. Black people on the other hand, reject scripture that supports slavery, but are accused of interpreting scriptures in a way that legitimises their oppression, condemnation and discrimination of Black homosexuals.<sup>66</sup> This approach to scripture demonstrates what Griffin refers to as 'selection bias,' or using the Bible for one's own benefit.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, despite dissenting opinions and numerous debates, Black church members still correlate their opposition and hostility to homosexuality with scriptures. This perhaps gives credence to Douglas' assumption that 'scripture is often the cornerstone of homophobia in the black community.'<sup>68</sup>

### **Homophobia in the Black Church**

Homophobia is believed to be a fear of homosexuals and of establishing close relationships with the same sex. It is also an attitude of disgust, repulsion, or hatred towards same-sex attracted people based upon the belief that homosexuality is morally wrong.<sup>69</sup> Scholars revealing the existence of homophobia within the Black society have alluded that Black churches have played a key role in its production.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 91.

<sup>67</sup> Griffin, p. 52.

<sup>68</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 90.

<sup>69</sup> Ward, p. 494.

<sup>70</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, 'The Black Church and Homosexuality: The Black and White of It', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 57 (2003), 32-45 (p.41), in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials <<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=f5a3944c-55fb-4de8-9835-fd0b35f51197%40sessionmgr4004&vid=5&hid=4209>> [Accessed 24 January 2014]. Griffin, p.149. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 3. Bell Hooks, 'Homophobia in Black Communities' in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. by Delroy

The heterosexist position and irrational fear of homosexuals and their sexuality are believed to be root causes of the homophobic behaviour and expressions within Black churches.<sup>71</sup> Cohen and Dyson use terms like 'blatant' and 'notorious' to describe the religious-based homophobia<sup>72</sup> that Rhue and Rhue believe to be 'inextricably linked to the black church.'<sup>73</sup>

Religion has been regarded by scholars like Shaw, McDaniel and Boykin as the major cause and the strongest predictor of Black heterosexual opposition to homosexuality.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, Black homophobia may not always relate to or originate from religious teachings as Ward points out. It may be the expression of a more general fear of sexuality resulting from the sexual exploitation that Black people have been subjected to during slavery.<sup>75</sup> Psycho-cultural response to historical events such as perpetual abuse from slave masters and the subsequent hypersexual stigma and demonization of Blacks that followed, changed the perception of sexuality to and of Blacks for many years.<sup>76</sup> It has been suggested that the legacy of abuse and racism also contributed to the onset of hypermasculinity observed in Black men as a means of regaining dominance and self-worth.<sup>77</sup> Consequently, homosexuality was seen as weakness and homophobia and homophobic rhetoric were tactics used to maintain a level of stature. These socio-cultural attitudes may have contributed toward the homophobia in the BMC we see today. Similar views are expressed by both Douglas and Griffin. They view Black people's passionate attitude and fight against homosexuality as unavoidable consequences of the past racism and the

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Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2000), 67-73 (p. 69).

<sup>71</sup> Robert L. Miller Jr., 'Legacy Denied: African American Gay Men, AIDS, and the Black Church', *Social Work*, 52 (2007), 51-61 (p.52), in *ERIC*, EBSCOhost <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=88177588-0f58-4475-9d0d-dfcacce9a38b%40sessionmgr11&vid=5&hid=9>> [Accessed 13 February 2013]. Stephen C. Finley, 'Homoeroticism and the African-American Heterosexual Male: Quest for Meaning in the Black Church', *Black Theology*, 5 (2007), 305-326 (p.319), in *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost, <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=88177588-0f58-4475-9d0d-dfcacce9a38b%40sessionmgr11&hid=9>> [Accessed 13 February 2013].

<sup>72</sup> Cohen, p. 235. Dyson, p. 235.

<sup>73</sup> Sylvia Rhue and Thom Rhue, 'Reducing Homophobia in African American Communities', in *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies*, ed. by James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 117-130 (p. 120).

<sup>74</sup> Shaw and McDaniel, (2007), p. 138. Boykin, pp. 141, 147.

<sup>75</sup> Ward, p. 495.

<sup>76</sup> Ward, p.495.

<sup>77</sup> Ward, p.497.

oppression they suffered. They further explain that Black people's anti-homosexual views are not merely a reflection of close mindedness and sexual bigotry on their part, but a phobia and prejudice brought on by years of abuse.<sup>78</sup> It is Douglas and Hopson's strong belief that if the history of oppression that shaped Black sexism was understood, it would be easier to understand the Black church's position regarding homosexuality.<sup>79</sup>

Moreover, Douglas reckons that homophobia, 'in many regards, is a sign of black people's own brokenness'.<sup>80</sup> Albeit, no excuses are offered for the Black church's anti-homosexual posture, regardless of the reasons, they advocate that 'values and structures that negate the humanity of another person or that stand in the way of social justice struggles need to be changed.'<sup>81</sup>

Contrary to general belief, several studies have confirmed that Blacks are no more homophobic than the wider heterosexual society.<sup>82</sup> Prominent Black people like civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, Coretta Scott King and others, have supported and forthrightly spoken up for gay and lesbian rights.<sup>83</sup> Notwithstanding, the reality and prominence of homophobia within the Black church and Black communities cannot be denied. Ward offers three explanations for its existence in the Black church namely, 'religious beliefs, historical sexual exploitation, and race survival consciousness.'<sup>84</sup> In other words, adherence to certain beliefs, sexual abuse and desire for the continuation of the Black race, are factors which contribute to the Black church's homophobic attitude.

Another point worth considering is that Black homophobia and homophobic behaviour were strategies implemented for protecting the integrity of Black sexuality from stereotypical and hypersexual definitions.<sup>85</sup> Black people were called demeaning names like promiscuous, bestial, lustful, demonised and were defined as

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<sup>78</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 88. Griffin, p.20.

<sup>79</sup> Douglas & Hopson, p. 106.

<sup>80</sup> Douglas, 'The Black Church and Homosexuality', p. 45.

<sup>81</sup> Douglas & Hopson, pp. 106-107.

<sup>82</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 88.

<sup>83</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 88.

<sup>84</sup> Ward, p. 495.

<sup>85</sup> Douglas, 'The Black Church and Homosexuality', p. 42.

hypersexual, sexual predators and people ruled by their passion and unrestrained sexuality.<sup>86</sup> To avoid confirming negative perceptions, gain moral respectability and social acceptance, Black people rejected homoerotic sexuality and distanced themselves from any person whose behaviour was deemed deviant.<sup>87</sup> Black people maligned, degraded and denounced homosexuality and resorted to homophobia, sexual conservatism and silence.

Families, schools, churches and other institutions in Black society, 'assiduously avoided addressing the fundamental issue of sexuality.'<sup>88</sup> Consequently, to this day, there is 'a suffocating silence which surrounds any discussion of sexuality in the Black Church, but particularly of homosexualities/bisexualities.'<sup>89</sup> In his book, Griffin notes the Black church's reluctance to speak about sexual issues and anticipates that his work would break hundreds of years of silence about a topic that most Black people would prefer not to speak about.<sup>90</sup>

### **Homosexuals in Black Churches**

As intransigent as a majority of Black churches are against homosexuality, homosexuals have always been present and actively involved in them.<sup>91</sup> Whether their sexuality was known or suspected, once they remained silent about their sexuality, their talents were utilised, and their positions and involvement were maintained.<sup>92</sup> This type of arrangement is perceived and categorised by Boykin as an

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<sup>86</sup> Douglas, 'The Black Church and Homosexuality', pp. 37-38. Beverly Greene, 'African American Lesbians and Gay Men: Life Between a Rock and a Hard Place', in *Handbook of African American Psychology*, ed. by Brendesha M. Tynes, Shawn O. Utsey, and Helen A. Neville, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 2008), 311- 334 (p. 324).

<sup>87</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 105. Griffin, p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> Ward, p. 495.

<sup>89</sup> Farajaje-Jones, p. 146.

<sup>90</sup> Griffin, p. Vii.

<sup>91</sup> Jeffrey Lynn Woodyard, John L. Peterson and Joseph P. Stokes, "'Let Us Go Into the House of the Lord": Participation in African American Churches Among Young African American Men Who Have Sex with Men', *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 54 (2000), 451-460, (pp. 454, 455), in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials  
<<http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=fb4735d4-8173-4d04-844f-25d8a715028f%40sessionmgr112&hid=105>> [Accessed 10 December 2014].

<sup>92</sup> Woodyard, Peterson and Stokes, (2000), pp. 454, 455. Miller, 'Legacy Denied', p. 52. Pinn, p. 109. Johnson, p. 38.

‘elaborate conspiracy of silence and denial’<sup>93</sup> and alluded to by Johnson and Pitt as the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ approach, typical of the stance some Black churches take to avoid confronting the homosexual issue.<sup>94</sup> This position has also been referred to by Finn as an association and disassociation affiliation that is often characterised as ‘love the sinner and hate the sin.’<sup>95</sup> Shaw and McDaniel see this as the ‘dual liberal and conservative dimensions of black religiosity,’<sup>96</sup> that tolerates homosexuals in the churches but demand that a part of who they are must remain invisible. Sexual secrecy and dishonest sexual practices are regarded as products of church-projected homophobia.<sup>97</sup> Griffin refers to this sinister hiding as ‘closetedness, a behaviour that often leads to deception and dishonesty.’<sup>98</sup>

The Black church and the Black community are inextricably linked. Abandoning church is rarely ever an option for Black homosexuals as Pitt’s study has indicated.<sup>99</sup> Despite constant ridicule, criticism, homophobia, enforced silence and denial, Black men with SSA frequently remain in traditional Black churches and endure the oppression.<sup>100</sup> They cherish the connectedness and community afforded them in Black churches, and ‘the need or desire to preserve this bond lead many black homosexuals to maintain their religious ties even when the church may seem unfriendly to them.’<sup>101</sup>

Remaining in a religious anti-gay oppressive environment could negatively affect individuals with SSA. This type of environment according to Griffin, ‘produces a lot

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<sup>93</sup> Boykin, p. 127.

<sup>94</sup> Johnson, p. 38. Richard N. Pitt, “‘Still Looking for My Jonathan:’ Gay Black Men’s Management of Religious and Sexual Identity Conflicts”, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57 (2009), 39-53, (p.47). < <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918360903285566> > [Accessed 16 February 2013].

<sup>95</sup> Pinn, p. 108.

<sup>96</sup> Shaw and McDaniel, p. 139.

<sup>97</sup> Farajaje-Jones, p. 146. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 3. Cindy L. Anderton, Debra A. Pender and Kimberly K. Asner-Self, ‘A Review of the Religious Identity/Sexual Orientation Identity Conflict Literature: Revisiting Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory’, *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 5 (2011), 259-281, p. 273<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2011.632745>> [Accessed 11 February 2013].

<sup>98</sup> Griffin, p.149.

<sup>99</sup> Pitt, ‘Killing the Messenger’, p. 58.

<sup>100</sup> Ward, p. 499.

<sup>101</sup> Boykin, p. 126.

of twisted black people.’<sup>102</sup> Griffin, sharing his experience says, ‘on one hand I experienced the rich nurture of the black church worship and affirmation of my blackness, while on the other hand, I internalized shame and self-hatred because the black church taught other gays and me that same-sex sexual attraction is sin’.<sup>103</sup> It appears as if the Black church is the place where religious gays feel discriminated against the most, but they are not quick to extinguish affiliation with their religious organisations.<sup>104</sup>

### **Internalised Homophobia**

Internalised homophobia is one of the major problems that gay people have to deal with. Homosexuals, internalising church and society’s homophobic attitudes, often experience a range of negative thoughts, feelings and symptoms frequently associated with internalised homophobia.<sup>105</sup> Internalised homophobia is thought to be especially prevalent in religious cultures where there are intense conservative views and teachings against homosexuality.<sup>106</sup> Results show that homosexuals affiliated with religious organisations not accepting of homosexuality, often experience higher levels of internalised homophobia.<sup>107</sup> This puts Blacks at risk because Black gay men’s involvement with religious communities is reported to be greater than White gay men, thus increasing the possibility of them developing

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<sup>102</sup> Griffin, p. 149.

<sup>103</sup> Griffin, pp. 2- 3.

<sup>104</sup> Alexandra B. Balaji and others, ‘Role Flexing: How Community, Religion, and Family Shape the Experiences of Young Black Men Who Have Sex with Men,’ *AIDS Patient Care & STDs*, 26 (2012), 730 - 737, (p. 733), in CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost, <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=104444947&site=ehostlive>> [Accessed 21 February 2015].

<sup>105</sup> James T. Sears, ‘Thinking Critically / Intervening Effectively About Heterosexism and Homophobia’, in *Overcoming Heterosexism and Homophobia: Strategies that Work*, ed. by James T. Sears and Walter L. Williams, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 13-48 (p.15). William L. Jeffries, Brian Dodge and Theo G. M. Sandfort, ‘Religion and Spirituality Among Bisexual Black Men in the USA’, *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 10 (2008), 463-477, (p. 465) <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13691050701877526#>> [Accessed 09 October 2014].

<sup>106</sup> J. Michael Wilkerson and others, ‘Religiosity, Internalized Homonegativity and Outness in Christian Men Who Have Sex with Men’, *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 27 (2012), 122–132, (p. 122) <<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=cbcf626a-abd5-436d-baba-f7e9e628a861%40sessionmgr4003&hid=4209>> [Accessed 23 April 2015].

<sup>107</sup> Wilkerson and others, pp. 123, 124.



internalised homophobia.<sup>108</sup> A study conducted by Balaji and others with sixteen gay Black men, provided evidence of internalised homophobia and identified 'biblical teachings, religious leaders, and the faith community as critical sources of homophobia.'<sup>109</sup>

### **Black Preachers and Internalised Homophobia**

Multiple works specify the strong influence that Black clergies have in shaping congregational purposes and beliefs.<sup>110</sup> To understand the extent of the Black clergies' influence, one has to understand the significance of the Black clergy in Black church culture and community. Black ministers hold authoritative, privileged and respected positions in their roles as spiritual leaders, advisors and advocates, and their influence far exceeds the confines of their church organisations.<sup>111</sup> Mitchell explains that the Black preacher 'has no exact counterpart in the white church, and to attempt to see the white minister on the same plane is to risk confusion, for the black preacher includes a dimension peculiar to the black experience.'<sup>112</sup>

Preaching is very important and the sermon, which is one of the major tools used by ministers in the Black church, is the focal point in the worship service.<sup>113</sup> The sermon is usually accepted as a word from God and is therefore taken quite seriously by the congregants. Sermons are regularly used to admonish, reinforce Christian ideals, address social issues, empower, condemn wrong behaviours and practices and to encourage and structure perceptions concerning right and wrong. It has also been noted that pulpits in Black churches are sometimes used to propagate homophobic

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<sup>108</sup> John L. Peterson and Kenneth T. Jones, 'HIV Prevention for Black Men Who Have Sex with Men in the United States,' *American Journal of Public Health*, 99 (2009), 976-980 (p. 976), in *CINAHL Plus with Full Text*, EBSCOhost

<<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=6e9c933a-d689-49b3-b338ff0977290460%40sessionmgr4004&vid=5&hid=4209>> [Accessed 11 February 2015].

<sup>109</sup> Balaji and others, pp. 733, 735.

<sup>110</sup> Billingsley, p. 11. Barnes, 'To Welcome or Affirm', p. 1410.

<sup>111</sup> Boyd-Franklin, p. 82.

<sup>112</sup> Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), p.65.

<sup>113</sup> Miller, 'Legacy Denied', p. 52. Bradshaw, p.51. Boyd-Franklin, p. 83.

messages,<sup>114</sup> and to express disgust and intolerance for homosexuality and homosexuals.<sup>115</sup> African American gay men participating in Miller's study admitted that while some sermons in Black churches have been life affirming, others with homophobic contents have had detrimental effects that resulted in individuals with SSA extinguishing their affiliation with Black churches.<sup>116</sup> It has been reported also that 'some Black ministers hurl condescending insults in their sermons to express disdain toward non-heterosexuals',<sup>117</sup> and 'it is not uncommon for some black ministers to regularly use derisive terms such as 'fags', 'punks', 'sissies', and 'bulldaggers' to refer to gays and lesbians'.<sup>118</sup> Derogatory statements like these are hurtful and contribute to the internal conflict and psychological distress that Black men with SSA in Black churches experience.

Furthermore, because of the power ascribed to Black ministers and to their teachings, their unfavourable opinion and remarks go unchallenged and unquestioned.<sup>119</sup> This fact was highlighted in Miller's study which explored the religious development and spiritual formation of African American gay men living with AIDS. He pointed out that Black social workers, brought up in Black churches would find themselves in a dilemma if they had to confront Black clergies on issues regarding homophobia, because 'confronting black clergy may feel like confronting "God's messengers."'<sup>120</sup> This assumption is perhaps reinforced by the fact that Black ministers, 'as if to free self from the damaging dictates they preach and proclaim',<sup>121</sup> declare that what they are saying comes from God who speaks through them. Persons with SSA constantly hearing and internalising anti-gay messages, are not only likely to suffer from internalised homophobia, but are likely to experience conflict as

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<sup>114</sup> Farajaje-Jones, p. 146.

<sup>115</sup> Jeffries, Dodge and Sandfort, p. 464.

<sup>116</sup> Miller, 'Legacy Denied', p. 51.

<sup>117</sup> Jeffries, Dodge and Sandfort, p. 464.

<sup>118</sup> Ward, p. 498.

<sup>119</sup> Ward, p. 498.

<sup>120</sup> Miller, 'Legacy Denied', p. 59.

<sup>121</sup> Ashton T. Crawley, 'Circum-religious Performance: Queer(ed) Black Bodies and the Black Church', *Theology & Sexuality*, 14 (2008), 201-222 (p. 211), in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001659167&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 29 March 2013].

well. Researchers have used the term cognitive dissonance to describe this kind of conflict.<sup>122</sup> Festinger's theory on cognitive dissonance lends some understanding and provides strategies that might be useful in exploring the experiences of Black men struggling with SSA and religious beliefs.

### **Cognitive Dissonance**

Festinger, the founder of cognitive dissonance theory, purports that dissonance occurs when the relationship between two elements are inconsistent with each other. Festinger refers to the elements as cognitions, the things known about oneself, one's environment and one's behaviour.<sup>123</sup> Whenever there is inconsistency between any of these elements, for example beliefs and behaviour, the individual would experience a certain amount of dissonance and psychological discomfort.

The magnitude of the dissonance experience depends on the value and importance that the person places on these elements.<sup>124</sup> For instance, if a man's religious beliefs on homosexuality are very important to him and he is experiencing SSA, which is inconsistent with his beliefs, he will experience far more dissonance than a person with SSA who has no religious beliefs against homosexuality. The need for physiological consistency and relief will motivate the person experiencing the

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<sup>122</sup> Kimberly A. Mahaffy, 'Cognitive Dissonance and Its Resolution: A Study of Lesbian Christians', *Journal for The Scientific Study of Religion* 35 (1996), 392-402, (p.392), in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=cd26f97e-9bf9-41ea-b4a8-b580c3df2bd8%40sessionmgr10&vid=4&hid=9>> [Accessed 11 February 2013]. Scott Thumma, 'Negotiating a Religious Identity: The Case of the Gay Evangelical,' *Sociological Analysis*, 54 (1991), 333-347 (p. 335) <<http://socrel.oxfordjournals.org/content/52/4/333.full.pdf+html?sid=24b8c8c8-a7fb-4bff-b8f4-ec9fadaab0f6>> [Accessed 11 February 2013]. Mark A. Yarhouse, 'Same-sex Attraction, Homosexual Orientation, and Gay Identity: A Three-tier Distinction for Counseling and Pastoral Care', *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 59 (2005), 201-211, (p. 211), in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=aa4fe0eb-a987-4624-9976-6195939f9ee1%40sessionmgr4004&hid=4207>> [Accessed 2 September 2014].

<sup>123</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), p.3.

<sup>124</sup> Festinger, p. 17.

dissonance to act in ways to decrease the dissonance and the psychological pressure.<sup>125</sup>

One way in which dissonance can be eliminated is by changing one of the elements that is incongruent with the other.<sup>126</sup> Festinger suggests three strategies useful for bringing about this change and explains that the choice of strategy will depend upon both the type of elements involved and the total context of the situation.

Strategy one: change the behaviour causing the dissonance. This probably accounts for why some gay individuals have turned to conversion therapy as a way to reduce their cognitive dissonance or have prayed to be delivered from their SSA.<sup>127</sup>

Strategy two: change the environment that reinforces or contributes to the dissonance.<sup>128</sup> Even though changing the environmental cognitive element may be possible, the ability to change one's environment is limited, due to the fact that people may not always have control over their environment. Furthermore, an individual may resist changing or removing his or herself from the environment, as is the case with the gay Black men in Pitt's study. The Black church environment contributed greatly to their dissonance, but they resisted 'abandoning their affiliation with their anti-gay, but otherwise appealing, conservative religious communities.'<sup>129</sup>

Finally, strategy three: add a new cognitive element or belief as a means of bringing together two elements that are dissonant.<sup>130</sup> This strategy was utilised by Black gay Christian men in Pitt's study. The men, determined to remain in their Black churches, restructured their beliefs by replacing negative religious beliefs about being gay with positive ones. They also rebutted the anti-gay messages by claiming that the fault was with the human messenger relaying the message and not with God, or the

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<sup>125</sup> Festinger, p. 18.

<sup>126</sup> Festinger, p. 18.

<sup>127</sup> Anderton, Pender and Asner-Self, p. 272.

<sup>128</sup> Festinger, p.18.

<sup>129</sup> Pitt, 'Killing the Messenger,' p.58.

<sup>130</sup> Festinger, pp. 18-22.

message. To achieve cognitive consistency, they added a new cognitive element and belief to reduce the dissonance and in a sense reconcile the dissonant elements.<sup>131</sup>

Some aspects of Festinger's views on cognitive dissonance have been challenged by Cooper and Fazio. Joel Cooper and Russell Fazio's more recent theory of cognitive dissonance proposes a different view to Festinger's as to what produces cognitive dissonance. According to these scholars, it is not the need for psychological consistency as Festinger proposed, but the responsibility for an aversive event that produces cognitive dissonance, or the consequences that might result from a person's behaviour.<sup>132</sup> They claim that if there was no possibility for negative consequences to result from inconsistent behaviours or identities, an individual would not experience a state of dissonance.<sup>133</sup> For instance, if there were no negative consequences such as exposure, losing positions in church or eternal damnation in hell, as some churches proclaim, people perhaps would not feel any tension between their SSA and religious beliefs. Cooper and Fazio are convinced that 'the dissonance process begins with the performance of a behaviour whose consequences are judged to be aversive in nature. That is the behaviour produces, or has the possibility of producing, an event that one would rather not have occur.'<sup>134</sup>

Cooper and Fazio agree with Festinger's assumption that dissonance is related to an arousal of a psychologically uncomfortable force that produces pressure to act and to make cognitive changes.<sup>135</sup> A change of attitude is one of the means proposed for handling or reducing the discomfort that the person is feeling. However, a change of attitude is not always a viable option. The individual may have to resort to using other means such as reassessing the events that led to them experiencing

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<sup>131</sup> Pitt, 'Killing the Messenger,' p. 58.

<sup>132</sup> Joel Cooper and Russell H. Fazio, 'A New Look at Dissonance Theory', in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 17, ed. by L. Birkowitz, (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 229-266 (p. 238).

<sup>133</sup> Cooper and Fazio, p. 236.

<sup>134</sup> Cooper and Fazio, p. 241.

<sup>135</sup> Cooper and Fazio, pp. 243-244.

dissonance, or they may need to acknowledge their wrong doing and try to make amends.<sup>136</sup>

Researchers have discovered that cognitive dissonance is produced by both psychological inconsistency and the fear of negative consequences,<sup>137</sup> thus taking Festinger, Cooper and Fazio's views into consideration. This study acknowledges the importance of both views and the possibility of them providing insight into the lived experiences of Black men struggling with SSA and religious beliefs.

### **Cognitive Dissonance and Religious Beliefs**

Individuals within conservative Christian churches (most Black churches are classified as such), experiencing SSA are more prone to experience incongruence between their religious beliefs and their homoerotic feelings.<sup>138</sup> Griffin revealed that there are gay Black men 'in church struggling with feelings of immorality because their true sexual identity has been taught to them as sinful, degrading, shameful, pathological, and unnatural.'<sup>139</sup> Researchers and scholars have documented the discomfort, conflict and tension that persons with SSA experience within conservative Christian environments when they internalise teachings indicating that homosexual identity and spiritual identity cannot co-exist.<sup>140</sup> Rodriguez and Ouellette's study, offers four approaches that gay and lesbian Christians might use to alleviate the conflict

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<sup>136</sup> Cooper and Fazio, pp. 259, 260.

<sup>137</sup> Denese L. Levy and Patricia Reeves, 'Resolving Identity Conflict: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing', *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 23 (2011), 53-68 (p.59) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2010.530193>> [Accessed 14 June 2013]. Mahaffy, p. 393. Pitt, *Killing the Messenger*, p. 57.

<sup>138</sup> Mahaffy, p. 393.

<sup>139</sup> Griffin, p. 151.

<sup>140</sup> Anderton, Pender and Asner-Self, p. 264. Melinda Buchanan and others, 'Challenges of Being Simultaneously Gay or Lesbian and Spiritual and/or Religious: A Narrative Perspective', *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 29 (2001), 435-449 (p. 438) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01926180127629>> [Accessed 15 February 2013]. Levy and Reeves, p. 59. Mahaffy, p. 397. Eric M. Rodriguez and Suzanne C. Ouellette, 'Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay-Positive Church', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 39 (2000), 332-347 (pp. 332- 333) <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/0021-82>> [Accessed 15 February 2013]. Thumma, (pp. 334-335).

between their religious and homosexual identities: rejecting a religious identity; rejecting a homosexual identity; compartmentalisation; and identity integration.<sup>141</sup>

However, Richard Pitt pointed out that Rodriguez and Ouellette approaches 'are not easily adapted to the Black context, principally because of the vital role of the Black church in the lives of members of the Black community'.<sup>142</sup> Pitt found that although the gay Black men in his study were negatively affected by anti-gay church teachings, they never considered rejecting their religious identity.<sup>143</sup> Even those who were open about their homosexuality admitted that they could not give up their churches.<sup>144</sup> As a matter of fact, 'a number of them suggested that doing so would be as difficult for them as no longer affiliating with the Black community.'<sup>145</sup> Surprisingly, those who left and joined gay-affirming denominations soon became dissatisfied and returned to the Black conservative churches. They found that the Black gay affirming churches lacked moral standards and those that were predominately White lacked cultural significance.<sup>146</sup>

The second approach, rejecting the homosexual identity, was attempted by all of the men in Pitt's study. They admitted that they prayed asking God to free them from the abomination.<sup>147</sup> However, when their feelings and homosexual desires did not change, some of them resorted to ridiculing homosexuals and became sceptical of anyone claiming that God had taken away their homosexual orientation.<sup>148</sup>

Compartmentalising, the third recommended approach was deemed very difficult by Black gay Christians. Compartmentalising their lives into two separate identities that is, passing as heterosexuals at church and homosexuals outside of the church, was seen to be too complicated. Religious identity factored into so many areas of their

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<sup>141</sup> Rodriguez and Ouellette, pp. 334-335.

<sup>142</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 41.

<sup>143</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 43.

<sup>144</sup> Festinger, pp. 12, 13.

<sup>145</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' pp. 44, 46.

<sup>146</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 46.

<sup>147</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 44.

<sup>148</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 45.

lives that trying to live double lives would be extremely uncomfortable.<sup>149</sup> Furthermore, even though they might have had the advantage of enjoying both identities, keeping their homosexual self secret and hidden would require a great deal of effort, struggle and stress.

The final approach, identity integration, entails finding an identity that would allow for the expression of both the Christian and homosexual identity. Most of the men desired this approach as it offered them the possibility of embracing their homosexual identity and remaining an integral part of the church. The process of integrating the two identities into one gay-Christian identity include: interacting with other gay Black Christians, sharing with accepting heterosexual members in their churches and reinterpreting the biblical texts regularly used against homosexuality.<sup>150</sup> However, integrating would not be easy, because the Black churches that gay Black men want so much to be a part of, would not be accepting and supportive of them.<sup>151</sup> The likelihood of them sustaining a gay-Christian identity in an environment that is constantly reminding them of the incompatibility of these two identities would be almost impossible.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, the messages that the Black church sends out 'suggest that in order to fully embrace the Christian (and, in some cases, Black) identity, they must shun the sinful homosexual identity.'<sup>153</sup>

Evidently, Black men in Black churches trying to reconcile their religious beliefs and homosexual feelings are faced with numerous complexities. It is important to note that cognitive dissonance and struggling to understand oneself in the light of Christian beliefs and sexuality is not unique to gay Black men, gay Caucasian men struggle also. Albeit, while there are several gay positive denominations organised to enable Caucasian gay men to embrace their homosexual identity without abandoning their religious identity, that is not the case for Blacks. Pitt says, 'this kind of organized

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<sup>149</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 49.

<sup>150</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 50.

<sup>151</sup> Griffin, p. 149.

<sup>152</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 51.

<sup>153</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 51.



approach to bridging the potentially incongruent homosexual and Christian identities does not exist in most Black church denominations.<sup>154</sup>

### **Black Men and Issues of Masculinity and Homosexuality**

The stereotypical beliefs about men and masculinity, usually learned during early socialisation, form the basis of the male behaviour expressed as Black masculinity. Gender role socialisation of Black boys is generally monitored by parents and family members. From a young age, Black boys are taught cultural values, traditions, and the behaviours that are considered appropriate and inappropriate for boys. Masculinity is narrowly defined within the Black cultural context and this makes it difficult for many Black males to show alternative forms of masculinity or sexuality.<sup>155</sup> Griffin remarks that 'family members would view homosexuality as the worst thing for them,

even worse than being a drug dealer or an alcoholic.'<sup>156</sup> Males deviating from the traditional standards of masculinity or behaving in a manner that is typically described as feminine, are usually ridiculed and reprimanded. It is no wonder that President Obama, once seen as the pinnacle of manhood and the reconstruction of Black masculinity, was rigidly ridiculed and condemned by the Black community for his support of gay marriages.<sup>157</sup> The Black community saw his support of gay marriages as a deviation from the norm and no longer considered him a fitting model of Black masculinity.

Boyd-Franklin, in her study of African American families, emphasised that it would be a serious mistake on the part of therapists to assume that gender roles and relationship in Black families are equivalent to those of other racial and cultural

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<sup>154</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 51.

<sup>155</sup> Tyrone C. Howard, *Black Male(d): Peril and Promise in the Education of African American Males* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014), p.24.

<sup>156</sup> Griffin, p. 149, 156.

<sup>157</sup> Dennis Cauchon, 'Black Churches Conflicted About Obama's Stance on Gays', *Christian Century*, 129 (2012), 15 (p. 15), in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost <<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=484b7c53-8c35-4a59-be4e-ba4aba25ace4%40sessionmgr4001&vid=5&hid=4106>> [Accessed 24 January 2014].

groups.<sup>158</sup> If the meaning and form of masculinity in Black culture is not understood, White norms and expectations may be enforced on Black behaviour.<sup>159</sup> It is important to bear in mind that Black masculinity is not only distinguished from masculinity in general, it is also different from the more Eurocentric masculine attributes. A reason for this is the impact that socio-historical, economical and interpersonal influences have had on the development of Black males.<sup>160</sup> Black masculinity has been undermined by slavery, racism and oppression. Black males are raised and developed in the context of racial discrimination, unfair labelling, police brutality, gang violence, and Black-on-Black crimes. Furthermore, Black males are perceived as low achievers and are expected to perform at a lower level academically than their White peers.<sup>161</sup> These are issues that most Black men struggle with, even if they do so from a range of different vantage points.

The Black male's identity and manliness appears to be tied to his ability to perform. The Black community believes that "“real men” are gainfully employed, provide for and maintain leadership in their homes, and in other ways are able to exhibit control over their own destiny.”<sup>162</sup> Black men have been disempowered and denied the necessary opportunities by which to demonstrate the masculine goal ideals needed to prove their manhood.<sup>163</sup> On account of this lack, Black men have resorted to using sex and physical dominance as primary means of proving their masculinity.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Boyd-Franklin, p. 86.

<sup>159</sup> Robert Staples, 'Masculinity and Race: The Dual Dilemma of Black Men', *Journal of Social Issues*, 34 (1978), 169-183 (p. 170), in SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost <<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=4e2b7bad-b61e-4aef-a0a6-8fc3fdbabf13%40sessionmgr4001&hid=4106>> [Accessed 5 March 2015].

<sup>160</sup> Ward p. 496. Anthony J. Lemelle Jr. and Juan Battle, 'Black Masculinity Matters in Attitudes Toward Gay Males,' *Journal of Homosexuality*, 47 (2004), 39-51 (p. 48) <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J082v47n01\\_03](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J082v47n01_03)> [Accessed 17 February 2013].

<sup>161</sup> Boyd-Franklin, p. 89.

<sup>162</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan', p. 40.

<sup>163</sup> Staples, p. 175.

<sup>164</sup> James M. O'Neil, 'Patterns of Gender Role Conflict and Strain: Sexism and Fear of Femininity in Men's Lives,' *Personnel & Guidance Journal*, 60 (1981), 203-210 (p. 205), in Education Source, EBSCOhost, <<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=997e3c86-ac3d-4824-851c-d2dad1a8b528%40sessionmgr4004&hid=4214>> [Accessed 21 February 2015].

However, Pitt emphasizes that 'if sexuality remains one of the few ways that Black men can recapture masculinity withheld from them in the marketplace, endorsing Black homosexuality subverts the cultural project of reinscribing masculinity within the Black community.'<sup>165</sup> According to this, Black homosexuality diminishes cultural expectations of regaining Black masculinity, challenges the traditional models of masculinity and poses a major threat to it.<sup>166</sup> This perhaps explains to some extent the disdain that Fields and others discovered that Blacks have for homosexuality and Black homosexuals.<sup>167</sup> Unfortunately, because Black heterosexual men think it their duty to denounce homosexuality, 'the Black homosexual becomes the site of displaced anger for the Black heterosexual, and the scapegoat used to thwart his own feelings of inadequate manhood.'<sup>168</sup> Several authors agree that the Black male's ideologies of masculinity play a key role in distinguishing attitudes and response to homosexual men.<sup>169</sup> Black males were socialised to believe that Black men cannot be gay and that homosexuality was never a part of Black people's African heritage, but was introduced by Europeans and European Americans during slavery.<sup>170</sup> More specifically, homosexuality is believed to be 'the White man's disease' and is foreign to Black life.<sup>171</sup> This assumption misrepresents the pervasiveness of homosexuality in all races. Therefore Asante refutes it and explains that although there is no history of homosexuality ever being accepted as a normal lifestyle in African society, 'this does not mean that there were no people who were lesbians or gay in African society.'<sup>172</sup> It is also a belief that 'homosexuality is a *negation* of masculinity, and

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<sup>165</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan', p. 40.

<sup>166</sup> Eamonn McKeown and others, 'Disclosure, Discrimination and Desire: Experiences of Black and South Asian Gay Men in Britain', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 12 (2010), 843-856 (p. 847) <DOI:10.1080/13691058.2010.499963> [Accessed 4 October 2015].

<sup>167</sup> Errol Lamont Fields and others, 'I Always Felt I Had to Prove my Manhood': Homosexuality, Masculinity, Gender Role Strain, and HIV Risk Among Young Black Men Who Have Sex with Men', *American Journal Of Public Health*, 105 (2015), 122-131 (pp. 124, 130), in *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=103926671&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 8 February 2015].

<sup>168</sup> Johnson, p.37.

<sup>169</sup> Fields and others, p. 123. Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 12, 33. Lemelle and Battle, p. 45.

<sup>170</sup> Douglas, p.41.

<sup>171</sup> Balaji and others, p. 732.

<sup>172</sup> Asante Molefi Kete, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Chicago Illinois: African American Images, 2003), p.74.

homosexual men must be effeminate.<sup>173</sup> Weakness and femininity are qualities often used to describe Black gay men and are considered to be incompatible with Black masculinity. Balaji, says that 'negative attitudes toward homosexuality and a rejection of effeminate behavior are defining components of traditional ideologies of masculinity in the black community.'<sup>174</sup>

Femininity is considered to be inferior to masculinity and Black men seem pressured into adopting and expressing hyper-masculine behaviour as a means of affirming their masculinity and to express and project male dominance.<sup>175</sup> Fields and others explain that 'Black male gender roles of hypermasculinity (i.e., exaggeration of traditional masculine roles through behaviours such as sexual prowess, physical dominance, aggression, and antifemininity) have been described as a way for men disempowered by racial oppression to demonstrate power and authority.'<sup>176</sup> Black masculinity promotes the idea that homosexuality 'cannot be condoned or accepted as good for the national development of a strong people.'<sup>177</sup>

The Black church seemingly has and continues to play a big role in contributing to the hyper-masculine attitude, and the behaviour that has become socially popular in many Black male circles and in society as a whole.<sup>178</sup> Ward's opinion is that the Black church 'influences concepts of what it is to be a black man, thereby influencing the behaviour and lives of black males, both straight and gay.'<sup>179</sup> It is argued that the homophobic messages and the Black churches' rejection of homosexual men have wrongly reinforced and fortified the limited understanding and perception of masculinity held by Black males.<sup>180</sup> Heterosexual Black men, constantly hearing these

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<sup>173</sup> Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 736.

<sup>174</sup> Balaji and others, p. 731.

<sup>175</sup> Ward, pp. 498, 499.

<sup>176</sup> Fields and others, p.122.

<sup>177</sup> Asante, p, 73.

<sup>178</sup> Tyrone C. Howard, P.24.

<sup>179</sup> Ward, p. 498.

<sup>180</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan,' p. 40.

passionate homophobic messages, behave as if it is their legitimate and spiritual duty to bully, gay-bash and treat homosexuals in hostile ways.<sup>181</sup>

Another point of contention is the Black churches' promotion of heterosexual families and pro-creation, two things that are high on the list of ideologies and cultural expectations of Black masculinity. Since procreation is not possible between same-sex partners, Black homosexuals are viewed as non-contributors to the growth and expansion of the Black race. Despite the fact that gay marriage laws have been passed in the UK and in other countries permitting same-sex couples to marry, Black churches are still fighting to protect and preserve the strong Black heterosexual family that is presumably threatened and endangered by homosexuality. There is no letting up of the rigid and hostile condemnation of homosexuality within the majority of Black churches,<sup>182</sup> the context in which Black men are struggling to reconcile their SSA with their religious beliefs.

## **Summary**

This literature review identified the need for a study that investigates the lived experiences of Black men, in UK BMCs, struggling with SSA and their churches' teachings. The difficulties that Black men with SSA in Black churches experience surfaced in much of the literature reviewed. The notions of Black people and religion, the Black church and homosexuality, homophobia, cognitive dissonance and Black masculinity were explicated. However, there were little or no studies which represented this specific population of men in Black churches experiencing SSA, struggling to abide by their churches' teachings and beliefs about homosexuality.

Literature dealing with Black men and sexuality is quite sparse in the UK. In fact, my review of previous research highlighted that the UK scholars were significantly lagging behind the USA in addressing the issue of SSA and the Black church in the UK.

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<sup>181</sup> Ward, p. 499.

<sup>182</sup> Douglas & Hopson, p. 106.

However, whilst this was the case, the majority of studies and literature were written from a liberal viewpoint that focused specifically on the experiences of gay Black men in Black churches who are committed to a gay identity and are seeking acceptance.

There is a need for literature which adequately represents the viewpoints of individuals with SSA who wish to live within the teachings of their church and abstain from homoerotic behaviours. Black men with SSA who have decided not to accept a gay identity have not been fully represented by studies or literature and have been neglected by both sides of the Atlantic. It is anticipated that the present study will yield insights that will contribute to the filling of the gap in literature by giving a voice to this group of Black men. The following chapter discusses the qualitative phenomenological methodology.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Introduction

This research focused on the lived experiences of Black men struggling with same-sex attraction (SSA) and the teachings of Black Majority Churches (BMCs). Little is known about this population and no previous documentation was found in the literature describing this phenomenon from the experiential perspectives of Black men in BMCs. An appropriate research design was required to explore and seek understanding of the lived experiences of these men. This chapter addresses the research methodology and research design, highlights the participants' recruitment strategies, sample size, data collection and data storage procedures. It also discusses Colaizzi's method of data analysis and the techniques used, as well as ethical considerations and strategies utilised for ensuring trustworthiness.

### Research Design

To discover what the subjective world was like for Black men struggling with the teachings of their church and SSA required an appropriate explorative research design. I examined quantitative and qualitative research methodologies and decided that a qualitative inquiry was best suited for the study. Merriam suggested that researchers use a qualitative study if they are interested in knowing how people construct their worlds, interpret their experiences, and find out the meaning they attribute to them.<sup>183</sup> Silverman also recommends the use of qualitative methods when exploring people's life experiences and behaviours.<sup>184</sup>

This approach allowed for the uncovering of meaning and for eliciting in-depth first-hand account information from the participants which would have been difficult to convey quantitatively.<sup>185</sup> Quantitative research does not consider how a person

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<sup>183</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), p.23.

<sup>184</sup> David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2001), p. 25.

<sup>185</sup> Jerry W. Willis, *Foundations of Qualitative Research: Interpretive and Critical Approaches* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), p.107. Merriam, p.23. Denise F. Polit and Cheryl Tatano Beck, *Essentials of Nursing Research: Appraising Evidence for Nursing Practice*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn (Philadelphia:

experiences life and creates meaning of his or her world. It is mainly concerned with measurements, testing hypothesis, numerical data and quantifying social phenomenon.<sup>186</sup> Qualitative inquiry on the other hand, is less interested in empirical facts and focuses more on exploring complex human issues, attitudes, behaviours,<sup>187</sup> experiences and what matters within an individual's lived world.<sup>188</sup> The best way to understand a person's lived experience is to seek that knowledge from the person experiencing it. Despite this fact, qualitative research is often criticised for relying on data gathered through fallible human instruments and their ability to convey the information.<sup>189</sup>

To conduct this study, I considered several research designs within the qualitative field, including grounded theory, ethnography and phenomenology.<sup>190</sup> These share a number of commonalities, but their focus is somewhat different. There are variations to how the research question may be asked, sample selected and the data collected and analysed.<sup>191</sup> For instance, grounded theory is commonly used to discover or generate the theory grounded in the data. Ethnography is mainly interested in explicating meanings specific to cultures and social groups and phenomenology's primary search is for meaning and describing what life experiences are like for individuals experiencing them.<sup>192</sup>

Men struggling with SSA and the teachings of their church was an issue of concern that I had newly become aware of. It was necessary for me to obtain descriptions from the participants which adequately depicted their experiences and how they perceived them. Ethnography and grounded theory seemed unsuitable for this type

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Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2010), p.17.

<sup>186</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), p. 14.

<sup>187</sup> Catherine Dawson, *Introduction to Research Methods: A Practical Guide for Anyone Undertaking Research Project*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Oxford: How to Books Ltd, 2009), p.23.

<sup>188</sup> Willis, p.107.

<sup>189</sup> Denise F. Polit and Cheryl Tatano Beck, *Essentials of Nursing Research: Appraising Evidence for Nursing Practice*, 8<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2014), p. 8.

<sup>190</sup> Merriam, p.22.

<sup>191</sup> Merriam, p.22.

<sup>192</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 2. Patton, p. 104. Polit and Beck, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, p. 48. Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1998), p. 7. Merriam, p. 26.



of investigation, so I chose the phenomenological approach as it offered the best method for exploring the men's experiences. The phenomenological approach permitted me to enter into the lived world of the participants,<sup>193</sup> 'understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon,'<sup>194</sup> and uncover 'internal meaning structures, of lived experience.'<sup>195</sup> Creswell and Merriam are convinced that phenomenology is a fitting methodology for 'studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences.'<sup>196</sup> A phenomenological enquiry also proved to be ideal for addressing the study's primary question: How do Black men struggling with SSA and the teachings of BMCs perceive and describe their lived experiences?<sup>197</sup>

## Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophy that is recognised as an appropriate methodological approach in many disciplines investigating the meaning of human lived experiences.<sup>198</sup> It is 'often regarded as a philosophical perspective as well as a social research method.'<sup>199</sup> Phenomenological investigation uncovers and describes the phenomenon, 'identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon' as well as the 'underlying structure of the phenomenon.'<sup>200</sup>

The word phenomenology consists of two Greek words *phainómenon* meaning to show oneself and *logós* meaning thought or concept.<sup>201</sup> Phenomenology is different from other scientific approaches and disciplines, in that it attempts to gain insightful

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<sup>193</sup> Sokolowski, p. 2. Patton, p. 104. Polit and Beck, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, p. 48. Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Canada: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1998), p. 7. John W. Creswell, *Research Designs: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2014), p. 4.

<sup>194</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2007), p. 60.

<sup>195</sup> Van Manen, p. 10.

<sup>196</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, p.60. Merriam, p. 26.

<sup>197</sup> Lyn Richards and Janice M. Morse, *Readme First: For a User's Guide to Qualitative Methods*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), p. 52.

<sup>198</sup> Richards and Morse, p. 52.

<sup>199</sup> Richards and Morse, p. 52.

<sup>200</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Designs: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2009), p. 13. Merriam, p. 23.

<sup>201</sup> Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 229.

descriptions of the way people experience the world and focuses on the real world where people live their everyday lives.<sup>202</sup> Moran described phenomenology as:

[...] a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experience.<sup>203</sup>

Descriptive and interpretive phenomenology are two main approaches that guide the majority of phenomenological inquiries. The common goal of these two approaches is to understand lived experiences from the perspective of the people living them. Nevertheless, there are existing assumptions and philosophical differences between these two approaches.

### **Descriptive (Transcendental) Phenomenology**

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)<sup>204</sup> was a German philosopher and the recognised founder of the phenomenological movement. His philosophical ideas gave rise to and shaped the descriptive phenomenological approach to inquiry. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology focuses on epistemology (theory of knowledge) and 'explores the way knowledge comes into being'.<sup>205</sup> Husserl's view is that 'a human being is basically a knower'<sup>206</sup> and people can only know what they experience. It is Husserl's notion that knowledge can be discovered by turning 'to the things themselves'.<sup>207</sup> He promotes a discipline that 'endeavours to describe how the world is constituted and experienced through conscious acts.'<sup>208</sup> He assumes that experience as perceived by 'human consciousness has value and should be an object

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<sup>202</sup> Patton, p. 104. Max Van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 11.

<sup>203</sup> Moran, p. 4.

<sup>204</sup> Moran, p. 1.

<sup>205</sup> Richards and Morse, p. 48.

<sup>206</sup> Henry Pietersma, *Phenomenological Epistemologies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.38.

<sup>207</sup> Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 1994), p. 47.

<sup>208</sup> Van Manen, p. 184.

of scientific study.’<sup>209</sup> According to his beliefs, people sharing a lived experience share in common features of that experience. These commonalities must be identified so that a generalised description of the experience is possible and the essences (what makes the thing what it is) can be considered to represent the true nature of the phenomenon.

A major tenet of Husserl’s phenomenology is his belief in a condition of consciousness (transcendental subjectivity) where the investigator is able to successfully discard his or her own experiences and describe the phenomenon in its pure state. He proposes that this can be accomplished by employing the process of bracketing. Bracketing is the putting away of pre-conceived ideas, knowledge, judgements, beliefs, prejudices and any biases the researcher may have to avoid undue influence on the data, and to examine the phenomenon with an objective and open mind.<sup>210</sup> Husserl promoted the importance of bracketing before and during the research process to ensure that the data gathered remains as pure as possible and not become skewed by the researcher’s pre-conceived notions. Furthermore, bracketing is valuable in demonstrating rigour and validity of the research.

### **Interpretive (Hermeneutic) Phenomenology**

Interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology is rooted in the philosophical concepts of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), another major figure in German phenomenology. Heidegger was Husserl’s former student and colleague but later became his rival.<sup>211</sup> He challenged and rejected certain aspects of Husserl’s phenomenological ideas such as his epistemology theory and adopted ontology (theory of being).<sup>212</sup> The question of ‘Being’, what it means to be a human being, or being in the world was more important to Heidegger than how a person knows things. For him, phenomenology

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<sup>209</sup> Kay A. Lopez and Danny G. Willis, ‘Descriptive Versus Interpretive Phenomenology: Their Contributions to Nursing Knowledge’, *Health Research*, 14 (2004), 726-735 (p. 727) <[http://web.unbc.ca/~kitchena/EDUC\\_610/Lopez\\_Willis\\_2004.pdf](http://web.unbc.ca/~kitchena/EDUC_610/Lopez_Willis_2004.pdf)> [Accessed 30 November 2013].

<sup>210</sup> Darren Langdridge, *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research and Method* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2007), p. 17. Richards and Morse, p. 70.

<sup>211</sup> Sokolowski, p. 3.

<sup>212</sup> Van Manen, p. 184.

is 'to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.'<sup>213</sup> In the relation of human studies, Heidegger felt that researchers need to go beyond description and essences and search for meanings that are not always apparent to participants but could be understood from what they disclose. What people experience rather than what they know is the main thrust of interpretive (hermeneutic) investigation.

Heidegger refuted Husserl's assumptions of bracketing. He believed that bracketing was unnecessary, and that it was virtually impossible for a person to cancel out his or her experiences relating to the phenomenon under study. In contrast, he thought it was necessary for personal awareness to be brought to phenomenological research and for the researcher to make a valid input in the interpretation. Interpretive phenomenology seeks meanings that are embedded in everyday experiences and understanding of the everyday world and people's interpretation of it.

Both descriptive and interpretive approaches to phenomenology afforded a valuable foundation from which to build an essential understanding of the phenomenon, by providing detailed descriptions and the participants' perspectives of it.

## **Theology**

Phenomenology is about understanding the experience as a thing in itself and applies to the description and evaluation of the experience, 'is a philosophy of experience that attempts to understand the ways in which meaning is constructed in and through human experience',<sup>214</sup> without attaching any value judgement to it. However, it is not about conceptualisation or morality, and therefore could only provide me with descriptive and interpretive aspects of struggling with SSA and the teachings of their churches. This falls short of fulfilling my research requirements, which need to be much more evaluative. I have identified theology as a tool that

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<sup>213</sup>Christopher Macann, *Four Phenomenological Philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 69.

<sup>214</sup> Swinton and Mowat p. 106.

would help me evaluate what I have discovered through the phenomenological study.

Practical theology is reflection on Christian practice and an academic discipline which in-cooperates several sources: 1) Scripture, the Bible; 2) traditions, what Christians have said in the past about particular issues concerning faith and practice; 3) reason, the use of our minds, our God-given faculties to reflect on doctrines and practices and 4) experience.<sup>215</sup>

Human experience is the starting point of Christian theology and it relates to and is concerned with human experience.<sup>216</sup> Phenomenology is the scientific study of how experience presents itself to the human consciousness, while theology aims to interpret experience. Phenomenology helps to bridge the gap between theological reflection and the real experience of human beings. A phenomenological point of departure can guard theologians against unthinking assumption that theology is concerned solely with concepts and abstractions. Theology must also take seriously the real experience of human beings in concrete situations of life in its variety and complexity. Phenomenology reminds theologians that God is not restricted to the realm of ideas only. Theologians should therefore not assume that their work is purely abstract and impersonal but should seek to ground their work in concrete reality and personal experience.<sup>217</sup>

In keeping with this focus on concrete and personal issues, I propose to engage in a phenomenological study of the experiences of a group of Black men in BMCs who report feeling SSA. These men are part of a wider community which is now speaking more openly about practicing homosexuality. This phenomenon mirrors changes in the wider society, which in recent years has transitioned to a much more accommodating posture concerning SSA and homosexuality in general. It is important for me to be aware not only of the experience of the men with SSA but also my own experience of responding to these changing attitudes in church and

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<sup>215</sup> Alistair McGrath, *Christian Theology an Introduction* 6<sup>th</sup> edn (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2017), p. 104.

<sup>216</sup> McGrath, pp.131-132.

<sup>217</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), p. 51.

society. Following the interpretive phenomenological approach, my conclusions are drawn from these experiences. Coming from a conservative Evangelical background, I need to demonstrate self-reflexivity in the way I approach this complex subject. This requires me to take into account what prejudices and uncritical assumptions I may bring when I seek to address this issue. It is important to be aware of how my own experience and my experience of reflecting on the experience of others is shaped by my historical understanding of the issue.

Migliore said that 'theology is faith seeking understanding.'<sup>218</sup> Trevor Hart said, 'Theology is the attempt by faith to understand itself, its object, and its place in today's world.'<sup>219</sup> J. Andrew Kirk in defining theology said:

It is a reflective, intellectual process carried out by a community of faith whose concern is with God and his relationship to the entire universe. This process gives a privileged place to certain sources of knowledge, namely the Bible, the ecumenical creeds, and other historical confessions of faith. It has two fundamental tasks: to make sense of the whole of life by reference to God, and to be an agent of the transformation of the whole of life so that it may reflect God's intentions.<sup>220</sup>

This study is dealing with a pastoral situation and theology is needed to bring transformation to it so I could reflect God's intentions to the people who are struggling with SSA. Theology goes beyond the the phenomenological analysis by evoking a response, trying to transform the particular situation whereas phenomenology implies taking the experience on its own merits.

James K. A. Smith in his book,<sup>221</sup> *Imagining the Kingdom*, helpfully elucidates the connection between phenomenological study and the process of theological inquiry. His approach brings these disciplines together with the purpose of exercising

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<sup>218</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1994), p. 2.

<sup>219</sup> Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), p.1.

<sup>220</sup> J. Andrew Kirk, *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission: Christian Mission and Modern Culture* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>221</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Work*, Vol 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

compassion, and this sits well with this study. A particular kind of theology that emphasises and provides the meaning of compassion is needed to enable me to interpret the men's experiences from the perspective of compassion. Smith argues persuasively that compassion is not merely a Christian virtue but is a pre-critical orientation that structures Christian experience of the world. It is a gospel imperative to have compassion on people who are experiencing SSA. Throughout the Bible the good news of the gospel is manifested in works of compassion. Jesus entered into people's situations and expressed compassion for their pain, agony, distress and affliction without prejudice as to what brought about their suffering. A central aspect of the gospel is to have compassion for suffering humanity. Same-sex attracted individuals suffer in various ways as a result of the actions or misgiving of others or themselves. They are equally in need of compassion and it should be shown to them in the same way in which it is shown to other sufferers in society without judgment and discrimination. Similarly, Leonardo Boff explains that, 'Com-passion, is not a minor feeling of "pity" towards those who suffer. It is not passive but extremely active. Com-passion, as the Latin philosophy of the word suggests, is the capacity to share passion with the other. It is about coming out of one's own sphere and entering into the universe of the other to suffer with the other, to be happy with the other, to walk with the other and build life in synergy with the other'.<sup>222</sup>

A theology of compassion affirms that 'mercy triumphs over judgement' (Jas 2:13) and learns to 'judge not, that [it] be not judged' (Luke 6:37). Taking into account theological interpretation as well as the voices and experiences of the participants themselves, I have chosen to use a theology of compassion as an approach along with phenomenological interpretation as it would enable me to adequately address the experiences presented by these participants.

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<sup>222</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Essential Care: An Ethics of Human Nature* (London: SPCK, 2008), p. 90.

## Participants

Five self-identified Black British and Black African Caribbean men, 18 years and over, participated in the study. They were all members of BMCs in the UK for an average of five years and were experiencing SSA but did not identify themselves as being gay. Three of the participants were in the 18-25 age range, one in the 26-35, and one in the 45-55.

### Selection of Participants

Participants were selected based on them having experienced or experiencing the phenomenon under investigation. This is in keeping with the guiding principle in phenomenological study on selecting participants.<sup>223</sup> The phenomenon does not only dictate the methods but also dictates the type of participants needed for the study.

Purposeful sampling, a method frequently used in qualitative research, was utilised to recruit the participants for this study. A defining characteristic of purposeful sampling is that the choice of participants is not random, the criterion for inclusion is decided before selecting the sample. The researcher selects participants that will provide useful information and 'can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study.'<sup>224</sup> Purposeful samples are usually "'information rich" and illuminative,'<sup>225</sup> and are cases 'from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research.'<sup>226</sup>

Finding participants within this population for the study proved to be quite difficult. Numerous possibilities, including, ministers, pastors, fellow students, organisations and a variety of individuals were explored. I thought of advertising in BMCs for

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<sup>223</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, p. 128. Moustakas, p. 107.

<sup>224</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, p. 125.

<sup>225</sup> Patton, p.40.

<sup>226</sup> Patton, p.46.



participants but rejected the idea as it would probably have increased the likelihood of respondents' identities becoming known. I eventually chose snowball sampling, an aspect of purposive sampling, as the best viable method for recruiting eligible participants. 'Snowball sampling is building up a sample through informants'.<sup>227</sup> I relied on the initial referral from the informer and continued using that technique (one respondent recommending another) to recruit additional respondents.<sup>228</sup> All of the respondents willingly talked about their respective experiences.

In earlier times, snowball sampling was not regarded favourably or accepted as a valid and applicable recruitment method. However, overtime, snowballing 'has been recognised as having considerable potential for the sampling of rare populations'<sup>229</sup> and 'is useful when studying sensitive or taboo topics or when target groups are difficult to reach.'<sup>230</sup> Lee agrees that 'snowball sampling does have advantages in cases where those being studied are members of a vulnerable or highly stigmatized group.'<sup>231</sup>

However, despite its value, snowball sampling does have its disadvantages and could be problematic for the research study. Firstly, the research depended on participants obtained by referrals, rather than a randomly selected sample, which increased the likelihood of sampling bias. Secondly, respondents may not only have the same study selection characteristics but are perhaps friends or interconnected in some way. Thirdly, it cannot be guaranteed that the chosen research sample is representative of the wider population. Nevertheless, there were factors that lend to improving the validity of the sample. The participants' experiences were diverse, and they came from different BMCs and from different regions. They were not all acquainted with

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<sup>227</sup> Lorraine Blaxter, Christiana Hughes and Malcolm Tight, *How to Research*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2010), p.170.

<sup>228</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, p. 127.

<sup>229</sup> Raymond M. Lee, *Doing Sensitive Research Topics* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1993), p.65. Seymour Sudan and Graham Kalton, 'New Developments in the Sampling of Special Populations', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 12 (1986), 401 -429 (p.413), in *SocINDEX*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=10456824&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 10 September 2015].

<sup>230</sup> Hennie R. Boeije, *Analysis in Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2010), p. 40.

<sup>231</sup> Lee, p. 67.

each other and one participant, recommended by True Freedom Trust (TFT),<sup>232</sup> was not acquainted with any of the other participants.

## Sample Size

According to the terms proposed by several scholars, my research can be defined as 'sensitive'. Sieber and Stanley, for instance, described sensitive studies as those 'in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research.'<sup>233</sup> Renzetti and Lee suggested that sensitive research includes studies that are concerned with behaviours that are 'intimate, discreditable or incriminating.'<sup>234</sup> Homosexuality is a sensitive issue<sup>235</sup> and identification of individuals participating in a study concerning homosexual behaviours, could result in negative consequences such as stigma, discrimination, rejection and isolation. This is especially true in the Black cultural context where this research was carried out. Homosexuality, although more widely accepted today in society and within some social groups,<sup>236</sup> continues to be a highly sensitive issue and less tolerated in Black society.<sup>237</sup>

One of the methodological challenges in doing sensitive research is sample size, due to difficulty in finding individuals to participate. Renzetti and Lee highlighted that sample sizes are often determined and affected by the level of sensitivity of the topic, culture, age, gender and other factors.<sup>238</sup> Undoubtedly, the sensitive nature of my

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<sup>232</sup> TFT is a Christian organisation that supports people who are struggling with un-wanted SSA or other sexual issues.

<sup>233</sup> Joan E. Sieber and Barbara Stanley, 'Ethical and Professional Dimensions of Socially Sensitive Research', *American Psychologist*, 43 (1988), 49-55 (p.49) <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=508225935&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 30 July 2016].

<sup>234</sup> *Researching Sensitive Topics*, ed. by Claire M. Renzetti and Raymond M. Lee (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1993), p. ix.

<sup>235</sup> Michael J. Reiss, (1997) 'Teaching about Homosexuality and Heterosexuality', *Journal of Moral Education*, 26 (1997), 343-352 (p. 346) <DOI: 10.1080/0305724970260308> [Accessed 30 October 2016].

<sup>236</sup> Raymond M. Lee, *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics* (London: SAGE Publications, 1993), p.5.

<sup>237</sup> Ernst, Frederick A. and others, 'Condemnation of homosexuality in the Black community: A gender-specific phenomenon?' *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 20 (1991), 579-585 (p.579), *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=1992-16302-001&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 8 October 2016].

<sup>238</sup> Renzetti and Lee, p. 5.

research topic prevented a larger number of eligible participants from participating and significantly contributed to the study's small sample size consisting of five men.

Apparently, sample sizes are usually small in qualitative studies on sensitive topics or contemporary phenomenon, such as child abuse, prostitution and drug abuse. The study by Morrow and Smith investigated the lived experiences, personal survival and coping techniques of eleven women who survived childhood sexual abuse.<sup>239</sup> It seems that studies regarding religion and homosexuality also tend to have small sample sizes. This was the case in a study published in the journal *Culture, Health & Sexuality* in 2005, reporting on the identity experience among six progressive gay Muslims in North America.<sup>240</sup> Miller also published the qualitative study reporting on the experience of ten African American gay men living with AIDS in the Black church.<sup>241</sup> In addition, Valera and Taylor explored the religious experiences of nine Black men in the Black church, to find out how they coped with concealing same-sex behaviour whilst managing their religious traditions.<sup>242</sup>

There is no actual stipulation as to what sample size constitutes a viable project.<sup>243</sup> Marshall is of the opinion that 'an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question. For simple questions or very detailed studies, this might be in single figures.'<sup>244</sup> Creswell remarked that in qualitative phenomenological research, numbers of participants have ranged from

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<sup>239</sup> Susan L. Morrow and Mary Lee Smith, 'Constructions of Survival and Coping by Women Who Have Survived Childhood Sexual Abuse', *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 42 (1995), 24 -33 (p.24), in PsycARTICLES, EBSCOhost <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=9f7955be-0c3a-4f9e-8612-1b6fa403429e%40sessionmgr110&hid=15>> [Accessed 20 November 2012].

<sup>240</sup> Omar Minwalla and others, 'Identity Experience Among Progressive Gay Muslims in North America: A Qualitative Study Within Al-Fatiha', *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 2 (2005), 113-128 in *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2005-01517-003&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 15 August 2014].

<sup>241</sup> Miller, 'Legacy Denied', pp. 51-61.

<sup>242</sup> Pamela Valera and Tonya Taylor, "'Hating the Sin but not the Sinner": A Study about Heterosexism and Religious Experiences Among Black Men', *Journal of Black Studies*, 42 (2011), 106 -122 <<http://jbs.sagepub.com/content/42/1/106.refs.html>> [Accessed 20 November 2012].

<sup>243</sup> Mark Luborsky and Robert Rubinstein, 'Sampling in Qualitative Research: Rationale, Issues and Methods', *Research on Aging*, 17 (1995), 89-113 (p.98) <DOI:10.1177/0164027595171005> [Accessed 10 September 2015].

<sup>244</sup> Martin N. Marshall, 'Sampling for Qualitative Research', *Family Practice*, 13 (1996), 522-525 (p.523) <<http://spa.hust.edu.cn/2008/uploadfile/2009-9/20090916221539453.pdf>> [Accessed 10 September 2015].

one upwards.<sup>245</sup> Giorgi, recommends that there should be at least three participants in qualitative phenomenological research so that the differences between them will provide variations in the raw data.<sup>246</sup> According to Denscombe, small sample size, 'is quite in keeping with the nature of qualitative data.'<sup>247</sup>

It is important to note that a small sample size has potential drawbacks, but does not mean that the project cannot deliver useful results.<sup>248</sup> Relatively small sample sizes have been used to generate large amounts of worthwhile in-depth information.<sup>249</sup> There were times when one case study was deemed sufficient.<sup>250</sup> Furthermore, a small sample could 'describe and explain what is happening within a smaller group of people'<sup>251</sup> and allow for a more in depth and detailed study. The size of the population of interest in this study is not known, therefore it is possible that the sample size is sufficient to deliver results that would be beneficial to a wider context. In addition, open-ended questionnaires distributed to BMC leaders, were utilised to offset the sample size and to substantiate and generate more data in this study. The questionnaires offered a context and environment in which the data could be analysed. Furthermore, they helped to shape emerging themes by adding raw data wherewith the phenomenon could be further studied and explored.

## Data Collection

Qualitative research allows the use of multiple methods to collect data about the same phenomenon.<sup>252</sup> Researchers have suggested that it is a good practice to check

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<sup>245</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, p. 126.

<sup>246</sup> Giorgi, p. 198.

<sup>247</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Research Projects* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1998), Amazon Kindle e-book, p. 25.

<sup>248</sup> Walter R. Borg, *Applying Educational Research: A Practical Guide for Teachers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1987), p.159.

<sup>249</sup> Denscombe, p.26.

<sup>250</sup> David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2000), p.46. Patton, p.46.

<sup>251</sup> Dawson, p.48.

<sup>252</sup> Juliet M. Corbin & Anselm C. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008), p.27.

information gathered from one source against other sources or one method against other methods.<sup>253</sup> This study employed two methods, in-depth semi-structured interviews and researcher designed open-ended questionnaires, to conduct the research and collect data.

## Interviews

Phenomenological inquiry strategies facilitate disclosure and provide space for individuals to describe their lived experiences through their individual voices. Interview is the most commonly used data collection method in phenomenological investigation<sup>254</sup> and was the primary source of data for this study. I obtained first-hand description of the phenomenon from the participants by asking appropriate questions and giving them the scope to express their experiences at will. This is in keeping with Colaizzi's suggestions that when a person wants to know about the phenomenon of interest, he or she 'must begin by contacting that phenomenon as people experience it.'<sup>255</sup>

Open-ended in-depth interviews are useful for 'getting beyond the surface appearances,'<sup>256</sup> obtaining descriptions, entering into 'other people's perspective' and exploring issues that 'cannot be readily studied using structured type questionnaires or surveys.'<sup>257</sup> It is also an effective tool for researching sensitive and personal issues which otherwise might remain hidden,<sup>258</sup> and for getting as complete a description as possible of an individual's lived experience in a phenomenological

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<sup>253</sup> Yvonna S. Lincoln & Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1985), p.314.

<sup>254</sup> Moustakas, p. 114.

<sup>255</sup> Paul F. Colaizzi, 'Psychological Research as the Phenomenologist Views it', in *Existential-Phenomenological Alternatives*, ed. by Ronald S. Vale and Mark King (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 48 -79 (p. 57).

<sup>256</sup> Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009), p.28. Lee, p. 104.

<sup>257</sup> Virginia Dickson-Swift, Erica Lyn James and Pranee Liamputtong, *Undertaking Sensitive Research in the Health and Social Sciences: Managing Boundaries, Emotions and Risks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.22. Patton, p.341.

<sup>258</sup> Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd edn (London: SAGE Publications Inc., 2012), p.4.

investigation.<sup>259</sup> Seidman says, 'at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.'<sup>260</sup>

Interviews with each of the five participants lasted for approximately forty-five to fifty minutes and were conducted between April and May 2013. Conducting the interviews personally enabled me to get a sense of the participants' experiences as well as to observe their expressions. It also helped to ensure the consistency of the interview and afforded the intimate contact needed for gathering this type of data. In the interest of safeguarding the participants' anonymity, it was deemed best to conduct one interview per participant although multiple interviews would have yielded more data. Albeit, researchers claim that participants are likely to disclose more to the researcher in an interview when they know that it is a one-off encounter.<sup>261</sup> Creswell mentions that 'phenomenology can involve a streamlined form of data collection by including only single or multiple interviews with participants.'<sup>262</sup> To compensate, participants were advised that during the course of the research, any information they wished to add could be done via telephone or email. One participant emailed some information that he felt he had omitted during his interview. This information was appended to and analysed with his interview transcript.

Interviews were conducted at locations, on dates and at times that were suitable to each participant. Four interviews took place in a hired room at a centre and one after business hours at the participant's place of employment. The interview sessions were guided by ten researcher-designed open-ended questions relating to the phenomenon under investigation (Appendix IV). The questions were not rigid in terms of the order in which they were presented but served as 'triggers that

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<sup>259</sup> Giorgi, p. 122.

<sup>260</sup> Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013), p.9.

<sup>261</sup> Dickson-Swift, p. 34.

<sup>262</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, p. 82.

encourage the participants to talk.<sup>263</sup> Participants were allowed the scope to develop ideas and describe their experiences in detail.<sup>264</sup> To further stimulate conversation and help with clarification various probe questions were asked. However, for effective comparable findings, the same open-ended questions were asked in each interview.<sup>265</sup>

Prior to starting each interview, I explained the purpose and nature of the study as contained in the participant information sheet and consent forms (Appendices I & II). Written copies of these forms were given to each participant as well as the opportunity to ask questions or voice any concern before signing the consent form.<sup>266</sup> All of the participants signed consent forms but chose not to keep a personal copy for reference. Permission was granted by each participant to digitally record the interview sessions and take notes. Although Willig and Gillham argue that the presence of a recorder and recording during an interview session could adversely affect the interviewee and the interview,<sup>267</sup> the participants appeared comfortable with the recorder and with being recorded. I assured them that I would be the only person who would listen to and transcribe the tape recordings. First name pseudonyms, (Cory, Harry, Jace, Lamar and Malik) were assigned to each participant and were used in all documentations and written materials. To avoid losing or omitting data, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim within twenty-four hours of concluding the interview and labelled with the participant's given pseudonym. To ensure accuracy of the transcribed data, each recording was listened to again while cross referencing it with the transcription.

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<sup>263</sup> Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008), p. 24.

<sup>264</sup> Denscombe, p. 113. Rubin and Rubin, p.31.

<sup>265</sup> Dawson, p.28.

<sup>266</sup> Denscombe, p. 109.

<sup>267</sup> Willig, p. 26. Bill Gillham, *Research Interviewing: The Range of Techniques* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), p. 39.

## Issues in Interviewing

Several interviewing issues are worth noting. I focus here on three of them. The first is the relations of power that could exist between the interviewer and interviewee. Patton termed it the 'inequitable power dynamics.'<sup>268</sup> Researchers often refer to the research interview as a 'partnership,'<sup>269</sup> however, attaining equality between the interviewee and interviewer is not easily achieved.<sup>270</sup> The interview, as Kvale argues, is not a 'dominance-free dialogue between equal partners.'<sup>271</sup> Holloway and Wheeler are of the opinion that it is a fallacy to believe that the interviewer and the interviewee work together in a relationship of complete equality.<sup>272</sup> It is understandable that the interviewee might perceive the interviewer as possessing a greater power<sup>273</sup> because it is the interviewer who sets the stage, organises the research and asks the questions.<sup>274</sup> Albeit, the researcher does not have exclusive power. This power dynamic is a reserve that the interviewer and interviewee could possess.<sup>275</sup> Each of them could exercise to negotiate what happens in the interview situation.<sup>276</sup> For instance, whilst the interviewer is entirely dependent on the interviewee for his or her knowledge of the research topic,<sup>277</sup> the interviewees have power over what they say and may decide not to be truthful or to mislead the interviewer.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Patton, p. 103.

<sup>269</sup> Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy and Patricia Leavy, *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.187.

<sup>270</sup> Immy Holloway and Stephanie Wheeler, *Qualitative Research in Nursing and Healthcare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Company, 2002), p.97.

<sup>271</sup> Steinar Kvale 'Dominance Through Interviews and Dialogues' *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12 (2006), 480-500 (p. 484) <<http://qix.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/12/3/480>> [Accessed 06 October 2016].

<sup>272</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p.97.

<sup>273</sup> Frederick Anyan, 'The Influence of Power Shifts in Data Collection and Analysis Stages: A Focus on Qualitative Research Interview', *The Qualitative Report*, 18 (2013), 1-9 (p.3) <<http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol18/iss18/2>> [Accessed 6 October 2016].

<sup>274</sup> Anyan, p. 4.

<sup>275</sup> Anyan, p.4.

<sup>276</sup> Anyan, p. 4.

<sup>277</sup> Anyan, p. 4.

<sup>278</sup> Orit Karnieli-Miller, Roni Strier and Liat Pessach 'Power Relations in Qualitative Research' *Qualitative Health Research*, 19 (2009), 279-289 (p. 283), <DOI10.1177/1049732308329306 > [Accessed 6 October 2016].



Judging from what scholars have said, interviewers by virtue of their profession, are in position of some power however much they attempt to achieve a relationship of equality with those they are researching.<sup>279</sup> The participants were aware that I was a BMC pastor. In Black churches (as discussed in chapter two), pastors are often held in high esteem and revered. Owing to the hierarchical power relation that generally exists between Black pastors and members, it was likely that the perceived power imbalance could have in some way influenced the participants' responses.

Holloway and Wheeler suggested that steps should be taken to minimise power imbalances.<sup>280</sup> I employed appropriate strategies such as: avoiding the use of ministerial titles, treating participants with respect, informing them of their right to refrain from answering any question. Besides, I acknowledged that they were the experts and I was indebted to their willingness to share their knowledge with me. I also listened with sensitivity, empathy and non-judgemental understanding to their views, concerns and personal experiences. Furthermore, I kept my role as a researcher separate from my role as a pastor. Even when participants became a bit emotional while disclosing sensitive information, to avoid role confusion, I refrained from reaching out and touching them. Asselin proposes that role conflict can occur 'when the researcher perceives or responds to events or analyses data from a perspective other than researcher.'<sup>281</sup>

Despite any power disparity that might have existed between the participants and myself, they did not appear hesitant or overly selective with what they shared with me. Voicing their experiences was perhaps empowering as the majority of them had not disclosed their SSA to anyone in their church. It was also possible that they perceived speaking to a BMC pastor was an opportunity to bring their experiences,

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<sup>279</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p.97.

<sup>280</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p. 97.

<sup>281</sup> Marilyn E. Asselin, 'Insider Research: Issues to Consider When Doing Qualitative Research in Your Own Setting', *Journal for Nurses In Staff Development*, 19 (2003), 99-103 (p. 102), CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost, <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=106785289&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 1 November 2016].

viewpoints and feelings to the forefront, with the expectation that it might result in some meaningful action and intervention.<sup>282</sup> If not for themselves at least for others in church like them. In any case, the participants were either open and honest or felt they had to respond in ways they believed a BMC pastor would approve.<sup>283</sup>

The second issue is interviewing participants that are known to the researcher. Tracy McConnell-Henry and others claim that participants who are acquainted with the researcher 'may feel they cannot be as open or expressive as they would like for fear of reprisals directly related to the information they provide.'<sup>284</sup> I was familiar with two of the participants and was aware that they might feel uncomfortable and embarrassed sharing and discussing personal sensitive information with me.<sup>285</sup> Throughout the research process I offered further assurances about confidentiality and anonymity<sup>286</sup> to help ease any concerns they may have had. It is arguable that in some cases acquaintance with a research participant could prove to be beneficial. The participant may feel safe and trust a researcher more who is not distant or anonymous.<sup>287</sup> This was perhaps the case, as both of the participants I was acquainted with, narrated their stories without any signs of discomfort. Nevertheless, I wondered if the acquaintance might have caused them to omit or emphasise certain elements in their accounts.

The third has to do with the issue of the researcher's gender in the interview, specifically studies of men conducted by women. Scholars have argued that gender could have some effects on the interviewee and play a prominent role in the research

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<sup>282</sup> Boeije, p.51.

<sup>283</sup> Arthur Asa Burger, *Media and Communications Research Methods: An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 2nd edn (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), pp.149 -150.

<sup>284</sup> Tracy McConnell- Henry and others, 'Researching with People You Know: Issues in Interviewing' *Contemporary Nurse: A Journal for The Australian Nursing Profession*, 34 (2009–10) 2–9 (p.3), CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost  
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=105155049&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 8 October 2016].

<sup>285</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p.98.

<sup>286</sup> McConnell-Henry and others, p.3.

<sup>287</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p.98.

process in shaping the information participants share with researchers.<sup>288</sup> Woman researcher Terry Arendell found in her study with divorced fathers that men have certain assertions of gender in studies of men by women.<sup>289</sup> Sallee and Harris noted that male participants who were interviewed by a female researcher 'pointed to their enlightened status as men' and those interviewed by a male researcher were 'conscious about fulfilling expectations of traditional masculinities.'<sup>290</sup> It appears as if men feel the need to exaggerate their masculine behaviours to male interviewers and seemingly adopt behaviours that 'potentially reduce the likelihood of having their masculinities questioned or statuses challenged by male peers.'<sup>291</sup>

Masculinity is highly regarded in the Black culture by Black men trying to recapture a sense of lost manhood that has resulted from racial prejudice and discrimination.<sup>292</sup> Black men, as some studies showed, have embraced notions of masculinities which regard SSA and homosexuality as a violation of gender norms and masculine gender role.<sup>293</sup> Scholars have agreed that the Black male's ideologies of masculinity greatly influence how Black heterosexual men respond to men with homosexual tendencies.<sup>294</sup>

Men embodying marginalised masculinities, for example, gay men and Black men, are usually concerned with how male interviewers might perceive them and

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<sup>288</sup> Margaret W. Sallee and Frank Harris, 'Gender Performance in Qualitative Studies of Masculinities,' *Qualitative Research* 11 (2011), 409-429 (p.415), CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=104673175&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 3 November 2016]. Willig, p. 24.

<sup>289</sup> Terry Arendell, 'Reflections on the Researcher-Researched Relationship: A Woman Interviewing Men', *Qualitative Sociology*, 20 (1997), 341-368 (p. 363), <DOI:10.1053/A:1024727316052> [Accessed 1 October 2016].

<sup>290</sup> Sallee and Harris, p. 425.

<sup>291</sup> Sallee and Harris, p.425.

<sup>292</sup> Fields and others, p.122.

<sup>293</sup> Tres Stefurak, Crystal Taylor and Sheila Mehta, 'Gender-specific Models of Homosexual Prejudice: Religiosity, Authoritarianism, and Gender Roles', *Psychology of Religion And Spirituality* 2 (2010), 247-261 (p.248), *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0001818618&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 8 October 2016].

<sup>294</sup> Douglas, p.41. Balaji and others, p. 731.

subsequently challenge their status as men.<sup>295</sup> It has been suggested that men react more negatively and hold more prejudicial attitudes toward homosexuals than women. This position was observed by several researchers examining heterosexual attitudes towards homosexual relationships.<sup>296</sup> Lemelle stated that Black women especially, because of their greater caregiving roles, are inclined to exhibit more empathy for the social status of gay men.<sup>297</sup> Taking into account the particular issues surrounding Black masculinity and sexuality, my gender may have made it easier for the participants to share their experiences of SSA with me.

Although I cannot be conclusively certain, it is likely that because I was a woman, the participants perceived me a lesser threat to their masculinity. If the interviewer was a male, the possibility exists that the participants might have told their experiences differently, and not have disclosed in such depths, or displayed their feelings and emotional distress in the manner in which they did.

## **Questionnaires**

Undoubtedly, Black men struggling with SSA and the teachings of their church, is a complex phenomenon. A number of the complexities inherent in the phenomenon were deeply embedded within the context of the Black community and BMC's attitudes and teachings. To get a better understanding and insight into these, as well as to explore the BMC leaders' opinions and beliefs about the phenomenon, I designed and used questionnaires that consisted of open-ended questions (Appendix V), to serve as a secondary source of data for this inquiry.

Questionnaires were emailed to ten Black male ministers. This selection was based on the criteria that they were giving leadership to a BMC organisation comprising two or more churches as this would give a better scope and demographic to the study. An information sheet and consent form (Appendices I & II) were sent to each

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<sup>295</sup> Sallee and Harris, p. 414.

<sup>296</sup> Stefurak, Taylor, and Mehta, p.248.

<sup>297</sup> Lemelle and Battle, p.42.

minister. Nine completed questionnaires and signed consent forms were returned. One minister chose not to complete the questionnaire as he felt that the subject was highly controversial and that his responses and views maybe misunderstood or misrepresented. The nine completed questionnaires were labelled M-1 to M-9 (Table1). Fifteen anonymous open-ended questionnaires (Appendix V) were also distributed to BMC male pastors and Black male leaders attending Spurgeon’s College. Eight completed questionnaires were returned and labelled SC-1 to SC-8 (Table 2). In total there were seventeen completed questionnaires.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Responding Black Ministers over BMC Organisations in UK**

Gender: Male Ethnicity: Black	Age Group	Number of Churches in Organisation	How They Defined Themselves Sexually
Respondent Identification			
M-1	Over 55	85	Heterosexual
M-2	36-45	3	A male
M-3	45-55	16	As God created me – male gendered
M-4	Over 55	12	Heterosexual
M-5	45-55	2	Heterosexual with no homosexual feelings
M-6	Over 55	102	Heterosexual
M-7	Over 55	9	Heterosexual
M-8	45-55	8	Heterosexual
M-9	36-45	2	Monogamous marriage

**Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Responding Black Ministers and Leaders Attending Spurgeon’s College.**

Gender: Male Ethnicity: Black	Age Group	Number of Churches in Organisation	Position in Church
Respondent Identification			
SC-1	Blank	Blank	Leader
SC-2	45 -55	3	Leader
SC-3	Blank	50	Pastor
SC-4	45- 55	Blank	Pastor
SC-5	Blank	5	Leader
SC-6	Over 55	1	Leader
SC-7	26-35	Blank	Leader
SC-8	Over 55	6	Pastor

The questionnaires added a new dimension and depth to the research.<sup>298</sup> The data they generated subsequently helped to off-set the limitations of the small sample size and also helped to corroborate the interviews and improve the validity of the study.<sup>299</sup> Moreover, the questionnaires brought to the study a variation in perspectives that would not have come from the interviews alone. To illustrate this, the men completing questionnaires were heterosexual ministers and leaders within the BMCs, who were offering an outsider’s account of the phenomenon. Responding from the stance of an outsider, they could maintain distance and lack appreciation for the men’s experiences and may be disposed towards an insensitive, judgemental

<sup>298</sup> Denscombe, p. 112.

<sup>299</sup> Denscombe, pp.84-85. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, ‘The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research’, in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publication, 2011), 1-20 (p. 6).

and critical view of them.<sup>300</sup> The interviews were conducted with men experiencing SSA and offered an insider first-hand account of the phenomenon. The subject was close to their hearts and they had experiential knowledge about it and its impact on their lives. Viewing the phenomenon from their perspective might offer different insight than solely viewing it from the perspective of the questionnaires.

In addition, the ministers occupied visible, authoritative powerful positions within the church and community and had a privileged voice whereby they could freely express their views, opinions, beliefs and interpretations of the phenomenon. Homoerotic attraction is seen as being different from perceived norms and the interviewees felt compelled by the heterosexual-dominated society to hide and become invisible. They saw themselves as part of a hidden population, having a marginalised voice that kept them from speaking out about their concerns, thoughts and viewpoints. The interviews presented an opportunity for them to be empowered and enabled to speak about their lived experiences.

Furthermore, whereas the interviews provided useful insight of the men's experiences, the questionnaires provided more background and better understanding of the environment in which the interviewees were struggling with church teachings and SSA. Undoubtedly, examining the phenomenon from different perspectives proved to be advantageous. The combination yielded valuable textual data which provided the raw data for this study and also influenced the shaping of the emergent themes.

### **Data Analysis**

A key feature of phenomenology is the rigorous process of data analysis.<sup>301</sup> Colaizzi, Giorgi, and Van Kaam formulated three frequently used methods of data analysis,

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<sup>300</sup> Dwyer and Buckle, p.57.

<sup>301</sup> Maura Dowling, 'Phenomenological Research Approaches: Mapping the Terrain of Competing Perspectives', in *Qualitative Research in Midwifery and Childbirth: Phenomenological*

based on Husserl's descriptive phenomenology. These three methods share in common the use of emerging themes to describe the meaning of an experience and the process of identifying and extracting common patterns from specific experiences. They differ however in the way findings are validated. Colaizzi's method for example, requires researchers to return to the study participants for validation of the findings, while Van Kaam's method requires that inter-subjective agreement be reached through expert judges. Conversely, Giorgi's method relies completely on researchers and considers it inappropriate to ask participants or external judges for validation.<sup>302</sup> Colaizzi's phenomenological method was the data analysis tool used in this study to analyse participants' transcripts because it allowed the participants who are the experts of their own experiences to validate the findings. It was also suitable for analysing the data in a study combining aspects of descriptive and interpretive phenomenology. Following is an outline of Colaizzi's seven steps procedure for phenomenological data analysis.<sup>303</sup>

### **Colaizzi's Method of Phenomenological Data Analysis**

1. Read and re-read each participant's verbatim transcript of the phenomenon.
2. Extract significant statements from the data that pertain directly to the phenomenon being investigated.
3. Formulate meanings from the significant statements.
4. Organise the formulated meanings into clusters of themes.
5. Integrate findings into a rich exhaustive description of the phenomenon being studied.
6. Validate findings by returning to research participants and compare the researcher's descriptive results with their experiences. This is called a member check.

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*Approaches*, ed by Gill Thomson, Fiona Dykes and Soo Downe, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 55-78 (p.61).

<sup>302</sup> Polit and Beck, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, p. 308.

<sup>303</sup> Colaizzi, pp. 59-61.

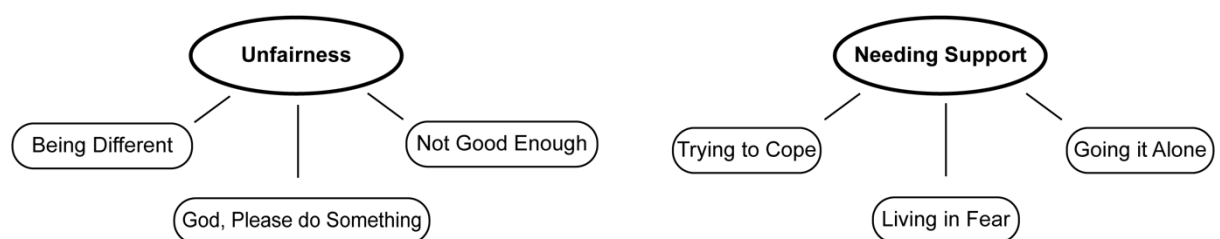


7. Incorporate any new relevant data obtained from the participants into the final description of the essence of the phenomenon.

Adhering to Colaizzi's method, I read and re-read each interview transcript primarily to become familiar with it and get a general sense of the whole content. Each transcript was read again several times to gain a comprehensive view of the participants' descriptions of their lived experience and to develop an in-depth understanding of them.<sup>304</sup> Next, significant statements or sentences pertaining to the phenomenon under study were identified, extracted and formulated into meanings. These meanings were catalogued into theme clusters, allowing for the emergence of themes common to all the participants' transcripts.

Two overarching themes, **Unfairness** and **Needing Support** emerged, both consisting of three subthemes (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Major Themes and Subthemes**



Data collected from the questionnaires correlated with both themes emerging from the interviews. In places, responses from the questionnaires served to directly strengthen the interviewee statements and give better understanding to their experiences. In regards to the theme unfairness, the interviews and questionnaires

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<sup>304</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd edn, p.270.

highlighted that there was indeed a difference in the way men with SSA were treated or perceived to be treated within BMC. The discrimination and ostracism voiced by the participants, due to beliefs held by the BMC were acknowledged in answers given by the majority of ministers in questionnaires. As well as these, a number of other similarities and consistencies between the interviews and ministers' answers supported subthemes.

The need for support was also clearly identified. Of interest, this was a reoccurring, consistent statement in each interview. Each participant found it difficult to cope, but they kept their SSA hidden from their church mainly because there was no known support system in BMCs for individuals struggling with SSA. Overwhelmingly, data from the questionnaires confirmed that there was no pastoral care framework in place for supporting individuals experiencing SSA, even for those wanting to remain faithful to the teaching of their church.

The two themes were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon (Appendix VI) and emailed to each of the five participants for verification. This technique, known as 'member checking,' is used to check accuracy of findings and interpretation with study participants and to ensure that the descriptive results truly reflect the participants' experiences and feelings.<sup>305</sup> All of the participants verified that the comprehensive description accurately captured and reflected the essence of their experience. No amendment or additional data emerged from the validation. The validated, finalised themes were then used in ways which allowed for theological interpretation, critical analysis and final conclusions.

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<sup>305</sup> Robert E. Stake, 'Case Studies', in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London, UK: SAGE, 2000), 435-454 (p. 450).

## **Data Storage**

Gillham says, 'an experienced interviewer who creates the condition for, and facilitates disclosures has a responsibility to the interviewee for how the material is stored (if it is), analysed and used.'<sup>306</sup> The University of Chester requires data to be kept for a minimum of ten years. All research data was securely stored in locked filing cabinets and no identifying data was stored with my findings. Data was stored electronically in a password, fingerprint recognition protected computer during data analysis and antivirus software protection was kept up-to-date to keep the computer from compromise.

For added security, participants and ministers signed consent forms were placed in secured sealed envelopes and stored at Spurgeon's College in locked storage cabinets. Following completion and acceptance of this study the audio recordings will be destroyed. The informed consent forms will remain for ten years as specified by the University of Chester and destroyed using a shredding machine to protect the participants' information.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Research of a sensitive nature gives rise to various ethical concerns. To guarantee that the rights and well-being of participants are protected, ethical approval is required before starting research studies involving human participants.<sup>307</sup> Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant ethics committees. Ethical considerations remained an integral and ongoing feature throughout the research process, and the ethical guidelines provided by the university were complied with. According to Silverman, researchers, while doing their research are actually entering the private lives of individuals.<sup>308</sup> This being the case, it is pivotal that researchers bring a strong sense of ethics to their research<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Gillham, p.10.

<sup>307</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* (London: The Guilford Press, 2011), p. 44.

<sup>308</sup> Silverman, p. 201.

<sup>309</sup> Yin, p. 38.

and be mindful of their moral obligation to respect the rights of the participants and minimise the risk to them and their families. The participants shared a secret that they did not want to become known. It was paramount to maintain ethical integrity throughout all stages of the research process, including distribution and disposal of data and publishing of results.

### ***Participant Information and Informed Consent***

An information sheet and consent form (Appendices II & III) were given to the participants. These provided them with information such as: the purpose of the research, voluntary participation and their rights to withdraw at any time, recording and transcribing of the interview, protecting anonymity and confidentiality, the length of time required for keeping their information and how and where to report complaints if it became necessary. Each participant signed the consent form before commencing the interview.

### ***Anonymity and Confidentiality***

When researching highly personal and confidential issues, identification of participants could carry certain risk and stigma.<sup>310</sup> Care was taken to conduct the interviews in locations where there was minimal risk that the participants' identities and connection to this study could become known. The researcher was the only person who had access to, listened to, and transcribed interview tape recordings. Pseudonyms were used on all documentations and the researcher was the only person who could link the pseudonyms with the participants. All identifiable information that could reveal the participant's identity or make it easily known were removed during the transcription process. Furthermore, no names, facts or quotes that could violate confidentiality will appear when this study is presented, or the findings published. Additionally, my laptop computer, mobile phone and iPad are password protected. To avoid being seen with the participant, communication was conducted via telephone and email. Recorded data and all information are kept in

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<sup>310</sup> Lee, p.102.

secured places inaccessible to others and will be completely destroyed at the end of the specified time for keeping them.

### ***Participants' Well-Being***

Participants were monitored closely during the interview for signs of discomfort or distress that might necessitate terminating the session. Three participants, while sharing their experiences, showed signs of sadness, one shed tears but quickly composed himself and carried on with the interview. All interviews were completed and at the end of each, time was spent with the participant to make sure that he was alright. I also provided him with information to access appropriate counselling services for follow-up care if he felt the need.<sup>311</sup> None of the participants showed any interest in speaking to a counsellor or accessing follow-up care.

### **Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research**

Creswell says, 'validity is the outcome goal of research and is based on trustworthiness.'<sup>312</sup> Unfortunately qualitative studies are frequently criticised on issues of trustworthiness.<sup>313</sup> In quantitative research the criteria for ensuring credibility of research data are objectivity, reliability and validity. These can easily be accessed and demonstrated through the use of standardised measuring instruments. Conversely, in qualitative research the researcher is the main data collection instrument, therefore credibility can only be assured through a demonstration of the researcher's effort and competency in representing the participants' experiences.<sup>314</sup> It is imperative that researchers take the appropriate steps to ensure that the research data is trustworthy and believable to the readers.<sup>315</sup> Trustworthiness of qualitative research depends on methodological accuracy and the

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<sup>311</sup> (1) True Freedom Trust, 0151 653 0773. They maintain a directory of approximately 130 counsellors around UK. (2) Terrence Higgins Trust, 080 8802 1221 (3) London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, 030 0330 0630 and (4) Living Waters UK, 020 7799 2200.

<sup>312</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, p. 333.

<sup>313</sup> Lincoln and Guba, pp. 289, 294.

<sup>314</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p. 254.

<sup>315</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p.11.

researcher's ability to confirm that the findings are truly reflections of the participants' experiences, and not merely the researcher's points of view.<sup>316</sup>

Patton's view is that it requires criteria different from those inherited from traditional social science to establish credibility of qualitative research.<sup>317</sup> Flick argues that 'there are many suggestions for alternative criteria, but none of them solves the problem of adequate quality assessment' in qualitative research.<sup>318</sup> Even if that is the case, Lincoln and Guba posit that trustworthiness of qualitative research can be enhanced or established by incorporating four main strategies: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. As a matter of fact, Lincoln and Guba, see these aspects as being equivalent to validity, reliability, and objectivity found in quantitative research and could adequately if not absolutely confirm the trustworthiness of naturalistic approaches.<sup>319</sup> In the current study, trustworthiness was enhanced through the strategies detailed below.

### **Credibility**

To increase the probability of producing credible findings, Lincoln and Guba suggest a number of activities such as prolonged engagement, participant observation, member checking, triangulation and peer debriefing.<sup>320</sup> Credibility was augmented by carrying out activities appropriate to this study.

(1) *Member checking*: each participant was emailed a copy of the exhaustive description of the research findings to get feedback, determine accuracy and to ensure that the participants' experiences are truly represented.<sup>321</sup> They all verified that it was an accurate description of their lived experiences, thus validating them. This helped to increase and strengthen the credibility of the study. Lincoln and Guba attest that member checking is 'the most crucial technique for establishing credibility'.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Polit and Beck, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, p.55.

<sup>317</sup> Patton, p. 546.

<sup>318</sup> Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: SAGE, 2009), p. 398.

<sup>319</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 43.

<sup>320</sup> Lincoln and Guba, pp.301- 308.

<sup>321</sup> Creswell, *Mixed Method Approaches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, p. 121.

<sup>322</sup> Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, p. 314.

(2) *Triangulation*: this study utilised two types of triangulation methods relevant to data collection: *person triangulation* collecting data from different type and levels of people (participants attending BMCs, students from a theological college and leaders of BMC organisations consisting of two or more churches), and *method triangulation* collecting data about the same phenomenon using multiple methods (participant interviews and open-ended questionnaires).<sup>323</sup> This technique allowed the same phenomenon to be looked at from different perspectives, compare data, validate conclusions and ‘build a coherent justification for the themes.’<sup>324</sup>

(3) *Peer debriefing* is ‘a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer.’<sup>325</sup> Peer debriefing occurred during discussions with fellow researchers at workshops and with an impartial PhD colleague experienced in qualitative research.<sup>326</sup> These collaborative sessions afforded me the space to test developing ideas, recognise personal biases, share concerns and explore thoughts, feelings, and frustrations. The meetings also provided fresh perspective, scrutiny of the project, valuable feedback and the opportunity to make amendments to the study. Lincoln and Guba suggest that peer debriefing helps keep the researcher honest.<sup>327</sup> Creswell adds ‘debriefing provides an external check of the research process.’<sup>328</sup> The searching questions asked during the debriefings caused me to engage in deeper reflexive analysis. This is in keeping with Lincoln and Guba statement, ‘the task of the debriefer is to be sure that the investigator is as fully aware of his or her posture [...] and of the role they play.’<sup>329</sup>

### ***Transferability***

Transferability is the ability to show the extent to which research findings in one context can be transferred to other contexts and yield the same or similar results. Unlike quantitative research, findings in qualitative research are usually specific to a small number of individuals and population. Lincoln and Guba claim that the

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<sup>323</sup> Polit and Beck, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, p.327. Holloway and Wheeler, p. 260.

<sup>324</sup> Polit and Beck, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, pp. 326, 327. Lincoln and Guba, p. 316.

<sup>325</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 308.

<sup>326</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p. 259.

<sup>327</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 308.

<sup>328</sup> Creswell, *Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, p. 251.

<sup>329</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 308.

establishment of transferability by the naturalist is virtually impossible.<sup>330</sup> Denscombe reckons that there is no way of knowing for certain that other contexts and groups will arrive at the same study findings and conclusions as another group and context, but claims that there are ways of dealing with this in qualitative research.<sup>331</sup> He proposes that the research should reflect 'procedures and decisions that other researchers can 'see' and evaluate in terms of how far they constitute reputable procedures and reasonable decisions.'<sup>332</sup> Denscombe is convinced that 'armed with the appropriate information, the reader can consider the transferability of the findings.'<sup>333</sup>

Transferability, as far as Lincoln and Guba are concerned, is more or less the responsibility of the person wanting to transfer the research findings and not really the researcher's. In their opinion, the researcher's responsibility is to provide sufficient information to allow comparison.<sup>334</sup> To allow transferability, accounts of procedures and methods were provided throughout this study. Explicit information was given that would enable the reader to determine whether the findings could be applied to another setting. The number of participants involved in the study, inclusion criteria and sample election are clearly detailed.

Transferability involves purposeful sampling. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, thus providing 'the widest possible range of information for inclusion in the thick description.'<sup>335</sup> 'Thick description'<sup>336</sup> of the phenomenon was generated through participants' interviews and is reflected in the text. In addition, the collection methods employed (interviews and questionnaires), number and length of interview sessions, and the period of time over which data was collected

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<sup>330</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 316.

<sup>331</sup> Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide: for Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (England: Open University Press, 2010), p. 300.

<sup>332</sup> Denscombe, p.300.

<sup>333</sup> Denscombe, p.301.

<sup>334</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 316.

<sup>335</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 316.

<sup>336</sup> 'Thick description' – means giving enough detail about the analysis and research so that readers will have a clear understanding as to what happened during the study.



are sufficiently documented. The fact that all of the interviews were conducted by the same individual is also a factor in the process of transferability.

### ***Dependability***

To ensure dependability of this research, a detailed description of the research methods and procedures is provided. An audit trail, of the raw data including audio tapes, a copy of the interview questions, interview verbatim transcripts, questionnaires, signed consent forms and other collected materials were compiled and maintained.<sup>337</sup> Holloway and Wheeler emphasise that 'all research should have an audit trail by which others are able to judge, to some extent at least, the validity of the research.'<sup>338</sup> Lincoln and Guba express that 'the audit may be the single most important trustworthiness technique available to the naturalist.'<sup>339</sup>

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability, although similar to dependability, directly involves the research participants. Confirmability is established when the findings of the study truly reflects the participants' experiences and are not biased by the researcher's interest and views. To verify that the analysis was consistent with the participants' experiences I returned to the participants for them to review and clarify that the findings accurately reflected their experiences. Additionally, I recorded my reactions and feelings shortly after each interview in order to identify and omit bias from the data analysis.

There were other enhancement techniques that I employed to ensure trustworthiness in the study, including, intensive listening during an interview, careful probing to obtain rich data and the effort put forth to recruit participants for the study. These are strategies used by qualitative researchers to enrich studies but because they are not easily communicated they are often overlooked.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Polit and Beck, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, p. 327.

<sup>338</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p. 262.

<sup>339</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 383.

<sup>340</sup> Polit and Beck, 8<sup>th</sup> edn, p. 325.

## The Researcher

### *Bracketing*

Bracketing is a necessary feature of phenomenological enquiry. This process requires the researcher to set aside pre-understanding and suspend what he or she previously knows, has come to believe or assumes about the phenomenon under investigation.<sup>341</sup> However, the effectiveness and even the possibility of bracketing prior beliefs, values and prior knowledge have generated much debate. Researchers such as Moran,<sup>342</sup> Langdridge<sup>343</sup> and Creswell,<sup>344</sup> have expressed some scepticism as to the likelihood of ever achieving the degree of objectivity required for authentic bracketing (suspension of judgement).

As a researcher, I wanted to be as objective and neutral as possible in order to understand and appreciate the realities of the participants' experiences and allow the phenomenon to unfold without interference and bias. Whilst trying to be an objective researcher, it would be remiss to assume that my many years as a pastor in the Black Majority Church had no impact on the study. I brought to the study years of teachings, beliefs, presuppositions and an understanding that scripture clearly indicates that homosexual practices are sinful and a deviation from God's intentions. Furthermore, I have been exposed to the negative attitudes, assertions, views and generalisations which pervaded the Black church and Black cultural society regarding SSA and homosexuality. Consequently, to maintain a non-judgemental attitude, I practiced bracketing before starting the study and throughout the interviews.

Bracketing proved to be much more challenging<sup>345</sup> than I anticipated or imagined.

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<sup>341</sup> Linda Finlay, 'A Dance Between the Reduction and Reflexivity: Explicating the "Phenomenological Psychological Attitude"', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 39 (2008), 32 (p.17), in Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=32579327&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 03 December 2013].

<sup>342</sup> Moran, p. 78.

<sup>343</sup> Langdridge, p. 18.

<sup>344</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: SAGE Publication Ltd, 2013), p.83.

<sup>345</sup> Finlay, 'A Dance Between', p.3.

Putting aside my beliefs and thoughts about homosexuality was quite difficult. I constantly tried to eliminate and minimise existing presuppositions, but was never able to completely eradicate them. This coincided with Colaizzi, Lincoln and Guba's claim that it is impossible to 'divest oneself of values'<sup>346</sup> or to achieve a 'state of absolute disinterest.'<sup>347</sup> Giorgi has a similar opinion. He states that it is unrealistic for anyone to assume that bracketing means forgetting everything known about the phenomenon under investigation.<sup>348</sup>

Finlay proposed that it is a case of maintaining openness and a non-prejudicial stance which, requires more than simply identifying previous understanding and trying to bracket them.<sup>349</sup> Following Finlay's suggestion, I tried maintaining an 'attitude of relative openness'<sup>350</sup> by frequently examining and re-examining my biases, and by engaging in bracketing throughout the study. In addition, as a practical measure, I debriefed often with my research mentor and this helped me to identify and diminish any impact that my assumptions may have on what I heard, saw and recorded.

### ***Insider/Outsider Status***

The insider-outsider status of the researcher has been greatly explored by social scientists.<sup>351</sup> Patricia Hill Collins introduced the concept, 'outsider-within' to describe how Black women domestic workers in White households were positioned. She emphasised that on one level they shared an insider relationship whilst on another they were considered as complete outsiders.<sup>352</sup> D'Cruz and Jones concurs with Collins that in a given situation, an individual could be an insider and outsider, or a shifting combination of both.<sup>353</sup> Insider researchers could be defined as those

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<sup>346</sup> Lincoln and Guba, p. 308.

<sup>347</sup> Colaizzi, p. 55.

<sup>348</sup> Amedeo Giorgi, *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology: A Modified Husserlian Approach* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009), pp. 91 -92.

<sup>349</sup> Linda Finlay, *Phenomenology for Therapist: Researching the Lived World* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2011), p.79.

<sup>350</sup> Giorgi, p.212.

<sup>351</sup> Sonya Corbin Dwyer, Jennifer L. Buckle, 'The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8 (2009), 54-63 (p.57).

<sup>352</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,' *Social Problems*, 33 (1986), S14-S32 (p. S14), <DOI: 10.2307/800672> [Accessed 18 November 2016].

<sup>353</sup> Heather D'Cruz and Martyn Jones, *Social Work Research in Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (London: SAGE

who share similar characteristics, roles, or experiences with the participants, and outsiders as those who are 'not seen as similar to their participants.'<sup>354</sup> In this study, in terms of my ethnicity and affiliation with the BMC, I could be considered an insider and could also be classified as an outsider, in terms of my gender and exclusive heterosexual attraction.

I discovered that there are advantages and disadvantages of being an insider-outsider researcher to the communities that are being studied. Sharing cultural similarities and church connections allowed me an insider's view into some of the Black cultural and Black church thinking and practices. The participants demonstrated a level of trust, openness and acceptance, which they perhaps would not have done otherwise.<sup>355</sup> There were also aspects of racial experiences in the study that a researcher of another race, without the cultural knowledge, may have found difficult to understand. Several times when narrating their experiences, participants used certain cultural phrases, innuendoes and terminologies without offering any interpretation. For example, one participant used the term 'anti-man,' a commonly used phrase in some Black societies when referring to a man with feminine mannerisms and characteristics. This type of interaction and assumption of understanding was representative of a shared familiarity,<sup>356</sup> which is perhaps due to the fact that the participants felt I was one of them and therefore I understood.<sup>357</sup> However, it could be problematic if participants assume that certain things are understood by the researcher and leave something out, and more so, if the researcher presuming to understand does not further investigate or seek clarity.<sup>358</sup>

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Publication,2014), p.105.

<sup>354</sup> Dwyer and Buckle, p. 90.

<sup>355</sup> Dwyer and Buckle, p.58.

<sup>356</sup> Valli Kalei Kanuha, "Being" Native Versus "Going Native": Conducting Social Work Research as an Insider', *Social Work*, 45 (2000) 439-447 (pp. 442-443) Education Source, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=507721065&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 17 November 2016].

<sup>357</sup> Dwyer and Buckle, p.58.

<sup>358</sup> Dwyer and Buckle, p.58.

In my position as an outsider, I was very much aware of my inability to understand the phenomenon under investigation. Nevertheless, learning from the participants and listening to their experiences, I was able to gain insight and fresh perspective regarding the struggle between SSA and the teaching of the BMCs. Arguments favouring outsider researchers claimed that they are 'more objective as they do not have loyalties to the culture being studied,'<sup>359</sup> and have the 'ability to observe behaviors without distorting their meanings.'<sup>360</sup> However, there are other arguments put forward against outsider researchers claiming that they cannot understand a situation if they have not experienced it. Conversely, Dwyer and Jones pointed out that 'one does not have to be a member of the group being studied to appreciate and adequately represent the experience of the participants'.<sup>361</sup> They further added that 'being an insider might raise issues of undue influence of the researcher's perspective but being an outsider does not create immunity to the influence of personal perspective.'<sup>362</sup>

### **Methodological Limitations**

This research had five main limitations. Firstly, the small sample size. A cohort of five participants was a relatively small sample and may not adequately represent all of the perceptions in a given community. However, small numbers are usually sufficient for a qualitative phenomenological inquiry. Giorgi recommends using at least three participants in a qualitative study.<sup>363</sup> Phenomenological study relies on the experience of the individual and seeks understanding of a particular phenomenon rather than aiming at representation and generalizability. Even if the participants' experiences bear some similarity to other Black men experiencing SSA, the sample was too small for the findings of this study to be generalised. Furthermore, the

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<sup>359</sup> James A. Banks, 'The Lives and Values of Researchers: Implications for Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society', *Educational Researcher*, 27 (1998), 4-17(p.6)  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1176055>> [Accessed 18 November 2016]

<sup>360</sup> Beverley Mullings, 'Insider or Outsider, Both or Neither: Some Dilemmas of Interviewing in a Cross-cultural Setting', *Geoforum*, 30 (1999), 337-350 (p.340).

<sup>361</sup> Dwyer and Buckle, p.58.

<sup>362</sup> Dwyer and Buckle, p.59.

<sup>363</sup> Giorgi, p.198.

participants' experiences may not be applicable to and may differ from Black men experiencing SSA in other religious denominations or cultural groups. It may be worthwhile exploring this in another study.

Secondly, non-probability sampling. The difficulty in recruiting participants led to me using the snowball sampling method. Furthermore, the choice of participants was dependent on the subjective choices of the originally selected participants and should not be considered to be representative of the population being studied. Notwithstanding, nonprobability sampling does not involve random selection, it is commonly used in qualitative research design. In addition, Faugier and Sargeant have pointed out, that even though there is 'personal bias and distortion inherent in snowball sampling as a price which must be paid in order to gain an understanding of these hidden populations and their particular circumstances,'<sup>364</sup> it is a valuable method.

Thirdly, the delimitations put on the sample. The sample was limited to Christian Black men with SSA attending BMCs, who accepted the teachings of their church regarding homosexuality, albeit struggling and had not taken on a gay identity.

Fourthly, data collection method. All of the data in this study was collected using self-reporting instruments and is therefore limited by potential biases and constraints that are commonly associated with self-reporting. Such as the participant's desire to look good or saying what he or she thinks the researcher wants to hear.<sup>365</sup> Findings were also checked with participants for accuracy. Lincoln considered this to be 'the most crucial technique for establishing credibility.'<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> Jean Faugier and Mary Sargeant, 'Sampling Hard to Reach Populations', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 26 (1997), 790-797 (p.796), in CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost, <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=107237697&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 20 January 2016].

<sup>365</sup> Wendy Baldwin, 'Information No One Else Knows: The Value of Self-Report', in *The Science of Self- Report: Implication for Research and Practice*, ed. by Arthur A. Stone and others (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2000) 3-9, p.3.

<sup>366</sup> Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, p. 314.

Finally, the results presented are the interpretation of data done by one researcher. However, creditability was enhanced by peer debriefing, discussions with fellow researchers at workshops, seminars and thesis committee members. Additionally, an audit trail including raw data, questionnaires and interview transcripts have been archived and can be made available. This can allow others to somewhat, validate and examine, the interpretation of the data presented in this study.<sup>367</sup>

## **Summary**

A phenomenological and theological approach to inquiry guided this qualitative study that aimed to understand the experiences of Black men struggling with SSA and the teachings of the BMCs in the UK. In-depth semi-structured interviews with five Black men and open-ended question questionnaires completed by Black ministers and leaders served as data. The interview data analysis was guided by Colaizzi's seven step data analysis technique. This chapter discussed the research design, selection of participants, sample size, data collection, storage and analysis, as well as ethical consideration, strategies to ensure trustworthiness, methodological limitations. The two major themes, Unfairness and Needing Support, resulting from this study should produce a greater understanding of the phenomenon and will be examined and discussed concurrently in chapters four and five. The process of reporting and discussing the findings will not exclusively follow phenomenological methods.

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<sup>367</sup> Holloway and Wheeler, p. 262.

## Chapter Four: Unfairness

### Introduction

Fair treatment is of fundamental importance to people. Generally, most people have expectations and concepts of fairness that have been shaped by cultural, religious and educational backgrounds, as well as family upbringing and experiences. Something within tells us that all things should be fair, therefore adjudicators are assigned in sports, politics, legal systems and such like, to ensure that things are done fairly. When it is perceived that not everyone plays by the same set of rules, or when behaviour directed towards an individual is inconsistent with the values that he or she holds, the need for justice is highlighted and the cry, “it’s not fair”, is usually voiced.

Unfairness was one of the two predominant themes coming through the interviews and questionnaires. Comments in the interviews suggested that the participants’ feelings of unfairness, represented their perception of inequality, maltreatment, discrimination, prejudice and oppression, which were allotted or in some cases self inflicted. Caught in the tension between their inner same-sex sexual drives and their church’s teachings, they struggled. McClendon refers to theology as struggle.<sup>368</sup> Struggling is often a response to unfairness and to systems that are patently oppressive. This is evident in the historical struggles of Black people for liberation from social existences that were marred with unfairness and oppression. Black churches and Black theologians such as Cone, are therefore positioned to claim that God is on the side of the oppressed and against unfair oppressors.<sup>369</sup> Hence the question ‘Why Lord?’ is a common retort by those who face such oppression. Participants in this study ask the question as they struggle to understand why a liberating God would subject them to a life of unwanted homosexual desires.

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<sup>368</sup> James Wm McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology* vol I, rev edn (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), p.17.

<sup>369</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), p.75.



Being different, not good enough and God, please do something, were three categories common in both interviews and questionnaires within which the theme of unfairness is located. In this chapter, human nature, the nature of sin and the nature of God are used within these categories, as basis for discussion and theological reflection.

### **Being Different**

Being different and standing out from the crowd are messages within 21<sup>st</sup> Century popular culture, relayed through the media, particularly reality television shows. However, being different is filled with its own challenges and demands. Having characteristics that set a person apart from the dominant group in a given context, could be quite daunting. Movements in support of race, gender and sexual orientation differences are currently prominent around the world. Laws and legislation have been passed to protect such differences from discrimination and unequal treatment. Consequently, there has been much improvement. Laws favouring equality for those with homosexual orientation are fairly new. About 50 years ago in 1967, homosexual acts became decriminalised and a comprehensive discrimination act was adapted in 2007 preventing discrimination of individuals in the workplace and in provisions of goods and services due to sexual orientation. More recently, with legalisation of same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples, those with a homosexual orientation can be seen to lead a similar life to heterosexual couples.

However, despite laws promoting equality and the decriminalisation of homosexual acts, these efforts have not responded to the participants' spiritual struggle and theological questions. Furthermore, the perception of difference remained persistent as observed in their responses in this study. Each participant understood himself to be different and felt socially disadvantaged and set apart from conventional norms. This is a struggle that resonates with me, for being a Black woman in England, from a very small Caribbean island, hardly visible and oftentimes

omitted from maps, sets me apart as a “small islander” within the dominant Afro Caribbean group. Therefore, I am positioned to understand some of the lack of understanding and pain associated with otherness, which participants are experiencing.

Humans are created in God’s image<sup>370</sup> and are bestowed with value and dignity. Unfortunately, those that are seen as the “other,” are not always given the respect, treatment and acceptance they deserve. Humans have the natural instinct to belong and are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by the need to form and maintain interpersonal attachments.<sup>371</sup> The role of belongingness is a factor that is also apparent in religion.<sup>372</sup> Discrimination of any type impairs belonging as is explained in the following response:

If I was to say to some of my church brothers that I am close with, look I am feeling things for guys, the relationship will be destroyed because they would think that I am different to them. (Lamar)

Participants felt that their churches discriminated against people with SSA, and have witnessed such behaviour, yet their need to belong has motivated and kept them from leaving their churches. Pitt,<sup>373</sup> Ward<sup>374</sup> and Boykin,<sup>375</sup> found in their studies that Black congregants with SSA do not readily sever ties with their churches even when the incongruous environment makes them feel bad about themselves.

Sexuality is also an important part of who we are as humans and how we experience and address ourselves as sexual beings.<sup>376</sup> Gender helps in developing sexuality, therefore, being male or female is likely to have a major influence on the

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<sup>370</sup> Gen. 1: 26-27.

<sup>371</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, ‘The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation’, *Psychological Bulletin*, 117 (1995), 497-529 (p.522) <<http://n.ereserve.fiu.edu/010018614-1.pdf>> [Accessed 1 April 2017].

<sup>372</sup> Baumeister and Leary, p.522.

<sup>373</sup> Pitt, ‘Killing the Messenger’, p. 58.

<sup>374</sup> Ward, p. 499.

<sup>375</sup> Boykin, p. 126.

<sup>376</sup> Molina Ludwin, ‘Human Sexuality’, California State University, Northridge, 1999, <<http://www.csun.edu/~vcpsy00h/students/sexual.htm>> [Accessed 5 April 2012].

development of individual sexuality.<sup>377</sup> The participants stated that having SSA prevented them from expressing human sexuality as they understood it to be, male/female attraction. However, it is not clear whether this was what they believed God wanted them to understand and expected of them, or it was simply what their churches taught. Judging from their statements, their beliefs and understanding of homosexuality were mostly informed by the teachings of their church. BMCs promote the heterosexual notion of sexuality and considers homosexuality to be sinful and certainly not an option for Christians.

Based on their perceptions and the teachings of their church, the participants understood themselves to be different and agonisingly question, why am I different?

Why me? Why do I have to be different from other guys? (Lamar)

Why am I different? I am a man; why do I feel like this about another man?  
(Jace)

Their question, why am I different, like Pinn's, 'why, Lord', were both seemingly forged within the paradox of a good and just God and the existence of evil and suffering. However, whilst Pinn, does not propagate a malevolent God who does evil to people,<sup>378</sup> Lamar apparently believed God to be responsible for the unfair disadvantage of having SSA and directed this complaint to him:

God, why do I have to deal with this, I didn't ask for this [...] why give me this, no one else in my family is like this? There are people who are not even serving you and they are not like this, it is so unfair. [Lamar]

From Lamar's perspective, it seemed unjust that he was serving God and yet God was allowing him to struggle with unwanted homosexual attraction, while others who were not serving him were not bothered by such feelings. One would think, from

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<sup>377</sup> Ludwin.

<sup>378</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (Maiden Lane, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 1995), p.15.

Lamar's query, that God values some people more than he does others, or is on the side of some and not on the side of others.

Tutu puts forward the argument that God is not neutral, impartial or indifferent to human sufferings and is always on the side of the despised, downtrodden and disadvantaged.<sup>379</sup> Leonardo Boff also endorses the notion of God's preferential option for the destitute and deprived.<sup>380</sup> If Boff and Tutu's assumptions are correct, then perhaps God is on the side of these Black men who are oppressed because of difference in sexual preference to other males. However, Jones contradicts the idea of God being on anyone's side.<sup>381</sup> He reckons that if God was on the side of the oppressed, and they are the objects of his unique activity, they would not have been recipients of such unprecedented sufferings.<sup>382</sup>

It was at various stages in their lives that the participants became aware of their attraction to the same sex:

I was exposed to ah, homosexuality from a young age [...] by an older cousin [...] experimenting sexually, and that awakened my sexual appetite and sexual feelings for guys which I did not necessarily understand. (Cory)

I grew up in the church and loved participating in the church, but when I came to puberty I started having feelings of interest towards other men. (Jace)

I came aware when I was sort of in my early twenties of my sexuality and attraction for men. [...] I think it was a result of me not having the masculine love from my father whom I never knew. (Harry)

The incidents causing the awareness of their SSA attraction varied, but the outcomes were inherently similar. They experienced the psychological tension of being in a

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<sup>379</sup> Desmond Tutu, *God Is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations* (New York: Harper Collin Publishers, 2011), p.65.

<sup>380</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p.107.

<sup>381</sup> William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p.201.

<sup>382</sup> Jones, p. 201.

context that considers SSA 'incongruous with our stereotype of what a given type of individual should be.'<sup>383</sup> Homosexuality is stigmatised and seen as 'an undesired differentness'<sup>384</sup> from what is expected.

Social stigmas that are perceptible to everyone have the tendency to induce shame, rejection, personal embarrassment and discrimination.<sup>385</sup> Individuals with concealable stigmas, for instance, mental illnesses, eating disorders, infertility and SSA, may resort to hiding.<sup>386</sup> To avoid negative reactions, stigmatisation, discrimination, isolation, rejection or being looked upon with disgust, the participants kept their SSA hidden.

The participants' struggle with being different or feeling different from their contemporaries, mainly because of homosexual attraction, is not unique to this study. Young male practising homosexuals, who took part in Newman and Muzzonigro's study described themselves as being different because of their lack of interest in the opposite sex.<sup>387</sup> This was also true of 150 gay men in another study conducted in the USA. Due to their excessive interest in persons of the same-sex, they perceived that they were different.<sup>388</sup> Black males are raised to pride their masculinity and were often reprimanded if they exhibited any form of behaviour that clashed with the Black masculine ideology.<sup>389</sup> Therefore the idea of difference is a big one.

The Black men in this study expressed the humiliation of seeing themselves as being different and not normal. They had SSA, and since the representation of normality is

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<sup>383</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p.13.

<sup>384</sup> Goffman, p. 15.

<sup>385</sup> Laura Smart and Daniel M. Wegner, 'The hidden Costs of Stigma', in *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, ed. by Todd F. Heatherton, Robert E. Kleck, Michelle R. Hebl and Jay G. Hull (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 220–242 (p. 220).

<sup>386</sup> Smart and Wegner, p. 220.

<sup>387</sup> Bernie Sue Newman and Peter Gerard Muzzonigro, 'The Effects of Traditional Family Values on the Coming Out Process of Gay Male Adolescents', *Adolescence*, 28 (1993) 213-226 (pp219-223) <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/195922782?accountid=14620>> [Accessed 30 July 2015].

<sup>388</sup> Richard R. Troiden, 'Becoming Homosexual: A Model of Gay Identity Acquisition', *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes*, 42 (1979),362-373 (pp. 363-364) <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=1981-03220-001&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 28 September 2015].

<sup>389</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for My Jonathan', p. 40. Fields and others, p.122.

characterised by a conventional lifestyle, which suggests that heterosexuality is the only natural expression of sexuality,<sup>390</sup> they perceived that they were abnormal. Traditionally, being a normal man or woman has been defined by attraction to the opposite sex and departure from that suggested abnormality.<sup>391</sup> Eric Maisel said that this concept of normal 'is tremendously influenced by how society and its institutions define "normal."'<sup>392</sup> The presumption of heterosexuality in society lead individuals to understand themselves in particular ways.<sup>393</sup> Beverly Greene explains that 'an individual's assessments of sexual behaviour and relationships are always embedded in a cultural context that defines both what is appropriate and what is not from a range of perspectives while usually reflecting attitudes and values of the dominant group in that individual's culture.'<sup>394</sup>

The participants felt that they did not fit into the social normal paradigm. They explained the attempts they made at trying to become normal:

I want to be a normal guy, with normal feelings towards girls so much that I even got into porn to see if I would get aroused by girls or whatever. (Lamar)

I want to be normal and have tried engaging with women so that my feelings would change, but they have not. (Jace)

We might ask ourselves how does God see people? Is there a normal with God? Does God label people normal and abnormal? How does God call us to see others? Our

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<sup>390</sup> David Buetti and others, 'Social Representations of Male Homosexuality and their Consequences for Gay Men: An Explorative Inquiry within the Canadian Context.' *Culture, Society & Masculinities* 8 (2016) 155-173 (p.159), *SocINDEX with Full Text*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=120633386&site=ehost-live>> (Accessed 13 February 2017).

<sup>391</sup> Beverly Greene, 'Delivering Ethical Psychological Services to Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients', in *Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Clients*, ed. by Kathleen J. Bieschke, Ruperto M. Perez and Kurt A. DeBord, 2nd edn (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), 181-199 (p. 183).

<sup>392</sup> Eric R. Maisel, 'What Do We Mean by 'Normal'? It is Time to Rethink 'Normal' and 'Abnormal'', *Psychology Today*, (2011) <<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/rethinkingpsychology/201111/what-do-we-mean-normal>> [Accessed 12 February 2017].

<sup>393</sup> David Buetti and others, p.159.

<sup>394</sup> Greene, 'Delivering Ethical Psychological Services', p.182.

culture's narrowing definition of what is normal and our faulty understanding of normalcy are root causes of exclusion, discrimination and rejection of a person's God-given uniqueness and image.<sup>395</sup> We are all distinctly created by God, therefore normal becomes a meaningless concept,<sup>396</sup> and our humanity and value are not destroyed by our differences.

Malik subjected himself to watching pornography as a means of becoming normal, and it became such an issue for him that he could not trust himself to be home alone or to keep his laptop in his room. Research indicates that some of the means people use trying to rid themselves of SSA could result in negative consequences. Reparative therapy is one such means. Individuals with homosexual attractions have been left frustrated, discouraged, disheartened and even suicidal by the apparent failure of this technique.<sup>397</sup> Whilst some may have experienced same-sex behavioural changes, their homoerotic feelings remained intact and their sexual orientation unchanged. Reparative therapy has aroused interest and condemnation from psychologists, therapist and others, and has not been endorsed by the Association for Christian Counsellors<sup>398</sup> and American Psychological Association.<sup>399</sup>

Some people believe that sexual orientation is innate and the possibility or impossibility of changing a person's sexual orientation is a much debated issue. Griffin poses that SSA is an unchangeable aspect in a person's life and it is wrong to expect a person born that way to change.<sup>400</sup> However, Grenz contradicts Griffin and argues that to date no scientific research, psychological, biological or sociological have substantiated that SSA is either innate or an unchangeable feature of a person's

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<sup>395</sup> David W. Anderson, *Reaching Out and Bringing In: Ministry to and with Persons with Disabilities* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2013), p.7.

<sup>396</sup> Anderson, p. 7.

<sup>397</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for My Jonathan', (p. 44).

<sup>398</sup> 'Reparative Therapy Ban' *Therapy Today*, 25 (2014) 4-4 (p.4) in CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rzh&AN=107893946&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 18 September 2015].

<sup>399</sup> Chuck Bright, 'Deconstructing Reparative Therapy: An Examination of the Processes Involved When Attempting to Change Sexual Orientation', *Clinical and Social Work Journal*, 32 (2004), 471–481 (p. 472), in SocINDEX with full text, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=15620900&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 9 September 2015].

<sup>400</sup> Griffin, p.20.

identity.<sup>401</sup> It is not known why some people may be predisposed towards a homosexual orientation and others are not. Whilst it is still a much debated issue the compromised explanation that has emerged so far is that nature and nurture both play important roles in determining one's sexuality.<sup>402</sup>

Participants throughout their interviews maintained that SSA was imposed upon them and not something that they had consciously chosen. For instance, Malik said 'I keep telling God that I didn't ask for this and I don't want it' (Malik). One wonders is this really so, or is it their way of dealing with the pain of difference? Could this also be a projection of their feelings of unfairness? Lamar's contention is evident in this statement:

God, I didn't choose this. Why couldn't you have given me something else like being addicted to alcohol, or you know just sex with a woman instead of having to deal with homosexual feelings? (Lamar)

Lamar was basically asking; what sort of God are you that you have given me this? Why this and not some other form of suffering? God is certainly implicated here, and by the other participants throughout their discourse, as the source of their SSA. Perhaps there is comfort in believing that their homosexual orientation is from God, as it would mean that someone is in control of their lives, that someone is responsible. If it is known for certain that homosexuality is from God, it would increase our tolerance level and soften our judgements.

Interestingly, the participants spoke of the distress, pain, confusion, torments, fears and ongoing struggles that their SSA has caused. If God has brought all of this misery upon them, by making them homosexuals, then what does this say about God? Does God create people homosexual? If he does, then why? Why would God make people same-sex attracted and then forbid them from expressing it? Does God set up people to fail, to be despised, rejected and branded as sinful? Undoubtedly, a God who wills

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<sup>401</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming But Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 32.

<sup>402</sup> Ryan D. Johnson, 'Homosexuality: Nature or Nurture', *AllPsych Journal*, (2003) <<https://allpsych.com/journal/homosexuality/>> [Accessed 1 March 2017].



such pain, agony and distress, is a hard God to serve, worship and love. To be honest, I am still intensely grappling with the issue of homosexuality, the conflicts and the numerous questions that it brings to mind.

The participants' struggle to remain faithful to the teachings of the church despite their inner homoerotic desires, was perhaps similar to that which Archbishop Desmond Tutu refers to as a moral and just struggle.<sup>403</sup> Regrettably, they found themselves up against a church structure of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusiveness. Responses on the questionnaires clearly indicated that church leaders preferred that they keep the information about their SSA to themselves. They did not want to know neither deal with the differentness that congregants with homosexual tendencies were likely to bring to their churches. They felt the best way to handle congregants in their midst with SSA, was to keep them hidden, shut them out mentally and deny their existence:

As long as their sexuality is kept behind lock doors and I don't know about it, it is no problem to me. (M-1)

It may be more safe for them to remain hidden whilst attempting to work on their struggles in private. (M-5)

The don't ask, don't tell solution is best for them and for us. (SC-7)

Unfortunately, over the years, Black people have learned to keep silent about sexuality, especially sexuality, such as homosexuality, that was considered deviant, in an effort to regain respectability.<sup>404</sup> Sadly, although many BMCs have affirmed Black humanity, it appears that they have not engaged the issue of Black sexuality. Silence on this has served to further compound the shame and antipathy concerning sexuality.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Tutu, p. 139.

<sup>404</sup> Cohen, p.72.

<sup>405</sup> Cornel West, 'Black Sexuality: The Taboo Subject', in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and*

Participants felt that they had to keep the sexual aspect of their lives hidden from their churches in order to enjoy certain privileges and receive fair and impartial treatment. Apparently, only people who present themselves as heterosexuals are welcomed, celebrated and rewarded with positions in most Black churches.<sup>406</sup> Jace admitted seeing the horrible way the church reacts to people with his similar struggle, and so he has kept his SSA hidden. The responses from the questionnaires substantiated that the participants had legitimate reasons to be concerned:

I think they hide that they are different for fear of being ex-communicated, and I think that it is better for the church that way. (SC-3)

Quite frankly, if I were gay, I imagine I would find the black majority church a hostile and judgemental environment. (M-5)

BMCs have had experiential understanding and knowledge of what it means and feel like to be treated differently. Regrettably, they seem to be rehashing similar treatment to congregants who they perceive as different. The establishment of BMCs was partly due to the fact that many ethnic minorities were ostracised and excluded from the traditional English churches, solely because they were different.<sup>407</sup> Being Black was the factor that made them different and excluded them from certain worshipping communities. White congregants were uncomfortable worshipping with people who were different. Since their formation, BMCs have lobbied for Black people's rights, fought against dehumanising systems, stood against oppression and have diligently worked towards empowering and affirming Black humanity. However, the discriminate way in which same-sex attracted congregants are treated, have brought the Black church under Griffin's critical indictment, that the once oppressed have now adopted the role of the oppressor.<sup>408</sup>

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*Sexuality*, ed. by Rudolph P. Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001) 301-307 (pp. 303-304).

<sup>406</sup> Griffin, p. 139.

<sup>407</sup> Sturge, p.87.

<sup>408</sup> Griffin, p. vii.

Griffin and other Black advocates have argued that the Black Church should accept homosexuality and allow homosexuals to fully express their homoerotic feelings.<sup>409</sup> However, this study's participants were not expecting the church to condone homosexuality or give them licence to explore and express their homosexual feelings. Their concerns had to do with acceptance, being part of, truly belonging and fully participating without being discriminated against because they were same-sex attracted. Malik emotively explains: 'I love the church and I think that's what hurts the most about it. The fact that because of your SSA you can be shunned [...] and not treated equally by the community that you love so much'(Malik).

Living with social prejudice, rejection, degrading treatments, segregation and struggle for human dignity and identity is not a new experience for Black people. It was within such a context that their perspective on suffering was crafted.<sup>410</sup> Consequently, there are points of affinity between BMC and being different that should promote solidarity with others who feel different and are unfairly treated because of those differences. Furthermore, God's willingness to be in solidarity with people who are persecuted for being different is clearly visible in the scriptures.<sup>411</sup> Jesus' stretched out arms on the cross symbolically demonstrates his openness and readiness to embrace all.<sup>412</sup> I believe the time has come for BMCs to reflect in their attitudes a willingness to respond compassionately to congregants who are struggling with being different, regardless of what that difference may be.

### **Not Good Enough**

Self-esteem is an essential fundamental aspect of human nature that is critical to the human experience.<sup>413</sup> Self-esteem has to do with how individuals think of themselves

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<sup>409</sup> Griffin, p. 210.

<sup>410</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. 169.

<sup>411</sup> Jesus ate with publicans and sinners (Matt. 9:11); touched the untouchable (Matt. 8:3); and loved the unlovable (Luke 8:2).

<sup>412</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 287-288. Tutu, p. 56.

<sup>413</sup> Quade Y. S. French, 2013, 'Adoption as a Contingency of Self-worth: An Integrative Approach to

within a larger community and 'establish a general evaluation of themselves as a person.'<sup>414</sup> Social environment plays an important role in the formation of self-esteem and identity.<sup>415</sup> For the most part of their lives, the participants were socialised in a church environment that view homosexuality as wrong and inconsistent with biblical teachings and Christian living. Black ministers responding on the questionnaires described homosexuality as sinful, an abomination to God, morally, naturally and scripturally evil, an unpardonable sin, and totally against what the Bible teaches. It is not surprising that experiencing something that their churches so adamantly condemned, influenced how the participants perceived and evaluated themselves:

I feel so dirty...there is dirt on me that cannot be washed away. (Cory)

I feel so messed up [...] I am just damaged goods that can never be fixed.  
(Lamar)

I feel very bad about myself. (Harry)

I feel like a broken person just wanting to be made whole. (Malik)

Most times I feel like scum. (Jace)

Dirty, messed up, damaged, broken and feeling like scum, are terms which characterised the realities of life for these men. Throughout the interviews it was evident that their sense of worth was categorised by societal attitudes, church attitudes and the attitudes of their family and friends. The effects of these attitudes as well as perceptions of themselves, left them feeling not good enough. Lamar said, 'I was made to feel as if I am the poor excuse of a man(Lamar)'. It is unfair for anyone to be made to feel this way. No matter what anyone thinks or feel about same-sex attracted people, they are as human and as valuable as everyone else. People are people in God's eyes, albeit part of a fallen humanity.

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Self-esteem in Adopted Individuals', *Adoption Quarterly*, 16 (2013), 128-152 (p.128), Education Source, EBSCOhost,  
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=87554887&site=ehost-liveviewed>> [Accessed 4 April 2017].

<sup>414</sup> French, p. 128.

<sup>415</sup> French, p. 139.

Augustine of Hippo advocated that everyone of us are all recipients of the same sinful fallen nature.<sup>416</sup> This concept of original sin, inherited by all, is a highly debatable issue. Christian thinkers such as Greek writers Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa argued against it.<sup>417</sup> However, it is undeniable that when it comes to deciding between doing right and wrong, we all struggle with a nature clamouring to express itself in a variety of ways. Jace, portrays this tension in his lament:

I am tormented because I am torn between two things, serving to my full effectual capacity in the Church and expressing my feelings of homosexuality. I cannot have both, yet it seems I can have neither. (Jace)

Encapsulated in this statement is the harsh reality of trying to live a committed Christian life. The daily outworking of faith and the ongoing process of self-denial, without any leeway for compromise is tough.

Whenever the participants failed to keep their commitment to consecrated celibacy, their experience of themselves as failures, undermined their sense of worth and predisposed them to feelings of not being good enough:

I hate myself whenever I succumbed to my SSA feelings. (Malik)

When it happens I am left feeling totally defeated and spiritually messed up. (Lamar)

I really really try you know, but I think it's because I am not good enough, why I give in sometimes. (Harry)

The participants' focus on being good might have blinded them of their finitude. John Stott pointed out that 'some of us are not leading holy lives for the simple reason that we have too high an opinion of ourselves.'<sup>418</sup> Humans are finite beings and

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<sup>416</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p.350.

<sup>417</sup> Alister E. McGrath, p. 350.

<sup>418</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966), p. 74.

failing is a normal part of human lives, no matter how much we try our best not to. Paul corroborated this when he said:

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.<sup>419</sup>

The problem as Paul saw it, had to do with his sinful nature and its propensity to sin. He admitted that he was not good enough himself and that he found it extremely difficult to keep God's laws.<sup>420</sup> Theologians argue whether or not the text refers to Paul in his unconverted state or after his conversion. But does it really matter? Both the converted and unconverted could realistically identify with the struggle depicted in the text. We all struggle with sin and the incapability of fixing our lives on our own. Fortunately, for all of us, Paul indicated later on in his letter that there is grace provided for the not good enough strugglers who were willing to give up their failing self-efforts to Christ and let him handle it.<sup>421</sup>

The participants did not accept their SSA to mean that they were homosexuals and did not define themselves by those feelings, however they were greatly confused as to who they were, especially when church, family, friends and peers, were defining them as such. Ten of the seventeen BMC ministers and leaders convincingly stated on the questionnaires that SSA and being a homosexual was one and the same thing. Skegg and others concurred and argued that persons experiencing SSA should be labelled homosexuals, because homosexuality should be defined on the basis of sexual orientation which includes SSA, and not on same-sex behaviour.<sup>422</sup> Their

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<sup>419</sup> Romans 7: 18-20.

<sup>420</sup> Michael Morrison, 'The Three-Way Struggle: Law, Sin, and Me: A Study of Romans 7' Grace Communion International, (2014) < <https://www.gci.org/bible/rom7> > [Accessed 23 February 2017].

<sup>421</sup> Michael Morrison, Grace Communion International, The Three-Way Struggle: Law, Sin, and Me: A Study of Romans 7 (2014) < <https://www.gci.org/bible/rom7> > [Accessed 23 February 2017].

<sup>422</sup> Keren Skegg and others, 'Sexual Orientation and Self Harm in Men and Women', *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 160 (2003), 541-546 (p. 541) <<http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org>> [Accessed 8 September 2015].

families and peers also labelled them homosexuals:

Growing up my family and friends kept saying, you know, you are gay, you are an anti-man as it is called it in our culture, so, I grew up thinking that about myself. (Lamar)

Guys keep telling me that I act like a sissy so I must be gay. Why can't they just see me as an ordinary guy instead of making me feel so bad about myself? (Malik)

Ironically, particularly in the area of sex, Black people have long had their identities defined by the dominant society's perception that Black sexuality is abnormal and something to be ashamed of.<sup>423</sup> Opinions are crucial in life and could positively or negatively impact peoples' lives. Individuals can be assessed, labelled, marginalised and made to feel bad about themselves simply because they exhibit certain mannerisms. On the questionnaire, a BMC minister claimed that he knew the men in his church who were homosexuals because 'their behaviour and looks betray their sexual orientation (M-7).' Sadly, I too have made assessments like this in the past, until people with whom I have related to as a pastor led me to believe differently. Literature suggests that behaviour and looks are poor criteria for determining a person's sexual orientation.<sup>424</sup> There are people who exhibit none of the mannerisms associated with SSA and yet they are same-sex attracted and vice versa.

Participants spoke of their dejection and sadness of sitting in their places of worship and hearing hurtful, harmful comments and terminologies used to describe them. Words like evil, abominable and devilish, conveyed the message to them that they were not good enough. It is important for BMCs to know that individuals experiencing SSA feel indirect rejection when they hear sermons or statements made in religious gatherings against homosexuals and homosexuality.<sup>425</sup> They found it difficult at times

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<sup>423</sup> Cohen, p. 35.

<sup>424</sup> Emery S. Hetrick and Damien A. Martin, 'Developmental Issues and Their Resolution for Gay and Lesbian Adolescents', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 14 (1987) 25-43, (pp. 35-36), in SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost, <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=16265019&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 1 September 2015].

<sup>425</sup> Eli Coleman, 'Developmental Stages of the Coming-Out Process,' *American Behavioral Scientist*, 25 (1982), 469-482 (p. 471) in *Education Source*, EBSCOhost

to detect whether they are despised by the church or by God. Black ministers and leaders admitted on the questionnaires that the way homosexuality issues are spoken about in BMCs, could be regarded as oppressive, homophobic and even aggressive:

The BMC's teaching and preaching are definitely not inclusive or neutral. To be honest, the teaching and preaching would be regarded as homophobic, hostile and exclusive. (M-1)

It is shameful that the church can at times be a very hurtful, intimidating and confusing community. Congregants are told that God loves them unconditionally,<sup>426</sup> yet those with SSA are treated in such unprecedented ways that it obscures the very love of God that churches propagate. It has been noted that once the BMC church finds out that an individual is same-sex attracted, that individual is seemingly deemed no longer good enough for the church or for God's people. A BMC minister stated on the questionnaire that 'it is inappropriate for persons with homosexual feelings to lead'(M-3). Certain positions are withheld from them and if they were functioning for instance as musicians, worship leaders or choir directors they would no longer be eligible to do so. In doing so, BMCs send a clear message to the congregants that people with homosexual inclinations are unworthy, no matter how much of their time and talent they contributed to the church before it knew about their sexuality.

This occurrence is certainly not unique to the BMC. Bates is of the opinion that the conflict over homosexuality in the Anglican Church is weightier than any of the contentions that it has had previously. He pointed out the depths to which the Anglican Church went and is willing to go in dealing with homosexuals, especially those desiring positions of leadership within the church.<sup>427</sup> An example where an

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<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=4666231&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 4 September 2015].

<sup>426</sup> Eric M. Rodriguez, 'At the intersection of Church and Gay: A Review of the Psychological Research on Gay and Lesbian Christians', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57 (2010), 5-38 (p. 9), in PsycINFO, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=2010-00746-002&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 10 March 2015].

<sup>427</sup> Steven Bates, *A Church At War: Anglicans and Homosexuality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2005), p. 12.



individual's sexuality has caused him to relegate his position within the Church of England was recently published in an article by the Guardian newspaper in April 2017. The article highlighted the case of a gay priest who has been passed over for promotion to bishop seven times in as many years. Reverend Jeffrey John became headline news in 2003 when he was appointed as bishop of Reading. This appointment caused much upset with the traditionalists in the Church of England and a very public media row ensued regarding his suitability for this position. His sexuality to them, deemed him unfit and unsuitable for the job and calling that he had worked in for years. Reportedly, he was asked to withdraw his acceptance of this post to quell the controversy and reinstate harmony within the church.<sup>428</sup> Jace questioned this type of behaviour by asking, 'is there no place in the house of God for sinners'(Jace)? Apparently not, if being good enough is the criteria for anyone wanting to be of service to God and to his people.

In his earthly ministry Jesus was constantly including people that were rejected. His response to the social outcast and those who were considered not good was prompted by his love and compassion. BMCs are perhaps less compassionate. A minister's response on the questionnaire provided understanding of the context in which the participants were struggling:

The church has the tendency to treat people with homosexual tendencies as lepers, exclude them from any significant church life and eye them with suspicion. [M-5]

The churches' lack of adherence to fairness norms has prevented even those who have chosen to abide by the teachings from being open about their struggle. Regrettably, the participants' flawed self-esteems were further devaluated by the tendency of the BMC to attribute SSA to demonic possession of the individual. Harry said:

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<sup>428</sup>Harriet Sherwood, 'Gay Clergymen Passed Over Seven Times For Promotion To Bishop', *The Guardian*, 6 April 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/06/openly-gay-clergyman-passed-over-seven-times-for-promotion-to-bishop-jeffrey-john-reading>> [Accessed 7 April 2017].

SSA was looked upon as being possessed by some sort of sexual spirit, something that should be exorcised out of the person [...] sort of 'de-possessed', if you understand. (Harry)

Several Black ministers and leaders expressed on the questionnaires that SSA is caused by demonic possession and as one said, 'must be delivered from(SC-5),' in order for the individual to get rid of homoerotic feelings. The thought of having demons living inside them, was a gruesome and horrific experience for the participants who were already wrestling with feeling different and not good enough. Malik spoke of desperately trying to get rid of his demon. He said:

After I heard about homosexual demons I actually tried to encourage myself to vomit, and then in my mind, thought I would be okay, I would be like other Christians, once the demon's gone, sought of thing. (Malik)

The insensitive and cruel language used to argue against homosexuality, homophobic name calling and verbal abuse,<sup>429</sup> also reinforced feelings of not being good enough. A Black minister, preaching in a large convocation in St. Louis USA, November 2014, called gay men "sissies" and said he hopes they would "bleed from their butts."<sup>430</sup> It is inconceivable to think that leaders in Black churches which once contributed to the deconstruction of injustices, empowered and affirmed Black dignity, and served as sanctuaries from abuse, could be seen as the instigators of such insults and negative stereotyping.<sup>431</sup> Black churches are influential in shaping opinions and values that

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<sup>429</sup> Ann Phoenix, Stephen Frosh and Rob Pattman, 'Producing Contradictory Masculine Subject Positions: Narratives of Threat, Homophobia and Bullying in 11–14-Year-Old Boys', *Journal of Social Issues*, 59 (2003), 179-195 (pp. 187-188), in SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=9049185&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 10 October 2015]. David C. Plummer, 'The Quest for Modern Manhood: Masculine Stereotypes, Peer Culture and the Social Significance of Homophobia', *Journal of Adolescence*, 24 (2001), 15–23 (p. 21) <[http://www.researchgate.net/profile/David\\_Plummer/publication/12073711\\_The\\_quest\\_for\\_modern\\_manhood\\_masculine\\_stereotypes\\_peer\\_culture\\_and\\_the\\_social\\_significance\\_of\\_homophobia/links/0deec529eeb0cb477e000000.pdf](http://www.researchgate.net/profile/David_Plummer/publication/12073711_The_quest_for_modern_manhood_masculine_stereotypes_peer_culture_and_the_social_significance_of_homophobia/links/0deec529eeb0cb477e000000.pdf)> [Accessed 28 September 2013].

<sup>430</sup> 'Atonement: COGIC Leader Slams "Disrespectful" Preacher & Apologizes to 'I'm Not Gay No More' Guy.' <<http://alwaysalist.com/faith/bishopblake-cogicapology/>> [Accessed 20 February 2016].

<sup>431</sup> Ward. P.498.

eventually form the basis of many of the cultural norms in Black society.<sup>432</sup> Congregants constantly hearing demeaning remarks from the pulpit, are likely to conclude that it is okay for them to verbally abuse, persecute and make cruel jokes about people with SSA.<sup>433</sup>

When negative societal attitudes and anti-homosexual messages are internalised and used as the means for self-evaluation, it could lead to a number of things such as, psychological distresses, personal neglect, withdrawal from others, depression, self-loathing, suicidal ideations and low levels of self-esteem and self-acceptance.<sup>434</sup> This was certainly the case for the men in this study, for 156 Roman Catholic priests in another study<sup>435</sup> and for those in studies carried out by Mark Yarhouse and others.<sup>436</sup> Persons who internalised negative and discriminatory messages about homosexuality experienced more self-loathing.

The 'indoctrination in the heteronormative values of their religious traditions'<sup>437</sup> and the Black cultural expectations and standards of manhood, contributed to the participants feeling that they were lesser than and not good enough as they were. Homosexuality is not readily accepted or believed to be part of the Black culture and

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<sup>432</sup> Billingsley, p. 185. Bradshaw, p. 48. Boykin, p. 124. Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 9. Perry, p. 33.

<sup>433</sup> Ward, p. 499.

<sup>434</sup> Ian H. Meyer and Laura Dean, 'Internalized Homophobia, Intimacy and Sexual Behavior Among Gay and Bisexual Men', in *Stigma and Sexual Orientation: Understanding Prejudice Against Lesbians Gay Men and Bisexuals*, ed. by Gregory M. Herek (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 160-186 (p. 163). Gregory M. Herek and Eric K. Glunt, 'Identity and Community Among Gay and Bisexual Men in the AIDS Era: Preliminary Findings from the Sacramento Men's Health Study', in *AIDS, identity, and Community: The HIV Epidemic and Lesbians and Gay Men*, ii, ed. by Gregory M. Herek and Beverly Greene, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995), 55-84 (p. 75).

<sup>435</sup> Stephan Kappler, Kristin A. Hancock and Thomas G. Plante, 'Roman Catholic Gay Priests: Internalized Homophobia, Sexual Identity, and Psychological Well-Being', *Pastoral Psychology*, 62 (2013), 805-826 (p.816), in *Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=91697269&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 2 September 2015].

<sup>436</sup> Mark A. Yarhouse, Stephanie Nowacki-Butzen, and D. Fredrica Brooks, 'Multiple Identity Considerations Among African American Christian Men Experiencing Same-Sex Attraction', *Counseling & Values*, 54 (2009), 17-31 (p.22), SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=60452938&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 3 October 2014]. Mark A. Yarhouse and others, 'Project Inner Compass: Young Adults Experiencing Sexual Identity Confusion', *Journal of Psychology & Christianity*, 24 (2005), 352-360 (p. 353), in in PsycINFO, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psyh&AN=2006-01090-007&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 30 July 2015].

<sup>437</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for my Jonathan', p. 45.

it is believed that something is very wrong with a Black individual who has homoerotic feelings. As a matter of fact, there are Black people who advocate that homosexuality originated from the White culture and Black people who identify as homosexuals or admit to having SSA are viewed with disdain.<sup>438</sup> The participants were not only dealing with SSA, but also with religious beliefs and cultural issues:

I don't want to be associated with homosexuality because it's not a part of our Black culture; it's not a Black thing. (Lamar)

Because a lot of Black people think that homosexuality is the White man's problem they look down on a Black man and is very hard on him if he admits that he has SSA. (Cory)

I think that particular the Black culture, be it African or Caribbean, they tend to be more, not so tolerant as the Europeans are with homosexuality because it goes against Black ideals and beliefs. (Harry)

Church, family and culture, pronouncing that they were neither wanted or should even be tolerated, lend to the participants' feelings of not being good enough. Living in a broken world, we are all broken in one way or another and daily miss the mark of goodness. This fact is often forgotten when judging people's worth and determining their fate. Numerous Black lives were indiscriminately dispensed with, discarded as inferior and gotten the rid of, by White men, some claiming to be Christians, who decided that Black people were not good enough to live. White men felt it their duty to protect and preserve the purity of the White race,<sup>439</sup> so they penalised and lynched Black people for something that they could do nothing about, their ethnicity and race. Metaphorical lynching is still going on in the churches misguided efforts to retain pureness. Undoubtedly, the purity of the Church is important to Jesus, but he is not seen lynching those who by some definition do not measure up. He was the only one qualified to stone to death the woman taken in

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<sup>438</sup> Balaji and others, p. 732.

<sup>439</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), p. 7.

adultery, but he did not.<sup>440</sup> Instead Jesus hangs on the tree alongside the discarded, the condemned and the not good enough, and offers hope, love and compassion and orders his Church to do likewise.

### **God Please Do Something**

The participants described living with SSA, as being ‘trapped in a deep dark hole’(Lamar), carrying around ‘a big rucksack full of dirt’(Cory), and having a ‘parasite, that just keeps eating away at you’(Lamar). Lamar said, ‘even in church, I find myself thinking about guys in a sexual way, and this cannot be right (Lamar).’ The invasiveness of their SSA as well as church, culture, family and friends oppressed the participants, physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually.

There are enormous complexities surrounding the issue of being a Christian and sexually attracted to the same-sex, which undoubtedly helped to escalate the participants’ suffering. They could not understand how committed Christians could be having SSA. Lamar stated, ‘I got saved [...] and I thought the feeling would go away but it didn’t (Lamar)’. Malik questioned, ‘How could I be saved and have feelings for another man, cause even just having the feelings, I feel like I am not saved (Malik)’? We may indeed question whether the participants’ expectations of salvation were reasonable. Is it realistic to believe that salvation would eradicate or change a person’s sexual orientation? The participants did not get the outcome that they anticipated and their unchanged homoerotic feelings led to prolonged struggles, huge amounts of internal conflict and discomfort, trying to harmonise their SSA with their Christian beliefs. Their struggles are reflected in these responses:

I never wanted to be a hypocrite, I wanted to be a real true Christian [...] to be honest, but in church I feel like a false witness, like if I am a phoney wearing a mask. (Lamar)

On a daily basis I experience self condemnation, and guilt. (Harry)

It’s like being blessed and cursed at the same time. (Lamar)

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<sup>440</sup> John 8:1-11.

The anguish that the participants were experiencing is not new. Attempts at combining Christian faith and SSA have often resulted in conflict, especially for those from conservative Christian backgrounds.<sup>441</sup> Thumma,<sup>442</sup> Pitt<sup>443</sup> Mahaffy<sup>444</sup> and Buchanan,<sup>445</sup> found that respondents in their studies, experienced ongoing struggles with their sexual desires and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the conflict described by the participants is consistent with the literature on cognitive dissonance, which suggests that individuals will become anxious and suffer discomfort when trying to hold together elements that are conflicting and inconsistent with each other.<sup>446</sup>

Ministers in BMCs, including myself, frequently proclaim that God is powerful, unfailing, and willing to intervene in human lives. God's capability to hear and answer prayer was also conveyed often. Black people's strong belief in prayer and the potential it has to bring about change, transform adverse situations and alleviate suffering, was what sustained and kept them over the years in the midst of all of their ordeals. The slaves' hopes rested in their prayers to God for deliverance and the belief that deliverance will result from their prayers.<sup>447</sup> It was not surprising that prayer was referred to several times on the questionnaires as the solution for anyone wanting to be free from homosexual desires.

The participants, being raised in the context of the BMC, felt that prayer was the only remedy from SSA, which they said had become a burdensome an enduring part of their lives. Harry said, 'I've asked and begged God many, many times to please take away my homosexual feelings and let me be free (Harry).' Malik desperately prayed, 'God, I would give anything to change (Harry).' Jace said 'I prayed and fasted and tried to cut off anything remotely sexual towards men so that my feelings will change

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<sup>441</sup> Melinda Buchanan and others, 'Challenges of Being Simultaneously Gay or Lesbian and Spiritual and/or Religious: A Narrative Perspective', *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 29 (2001), 435-449 (pp. 435-436) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01926180127629>> [Accessed 15 February 2013].

<sup>442</sup> Thumma, p.337.

<sup>443</sup> Pitt, 'Still Looking for My Jonathan', p.51.

<sup>444</sup> Mahaffy, p. 400.

<sup>445</sup> Buchanan, p.435.

<sup>446</sup> Festinger, p.3.

<sup>447</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, 'Slave Theology in the "invisible Institution"', in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in Slave Narrative*, ed. by Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 1-32 (p.11).

(Jace).’ However, although the participants prayed fervently, earnestly, passionately and continually, their homosexual feelings remained unchanged. They were devastated by the indifference and the seeming finality in God’s silence. Lamar voiced this distressing prayer:

God, I don’t know what you are doing, but I feel it’s better if you just take me because I do not want to deal with these homosexual feelings and the conflicts for the rest of my life. (Lamar)

God deliver me or kill me, was the desperate cry. Living with SSA was seemingly not a conceivable option. Wanting to die in order to escape from suffering is not an uncommon human condition. Unfortunately, some people experiencing homosexual attraction have given up on life rather than go on living with the feelings and likely ridicule.

The increased risk of suicide associated with psychosocial distresses, due to sexual orientation has been recognised and documented. D’Augelli, Hershberger and Pilkington conducted a study on a sample comprising of 350 youths, ages 14- 21, attending programmes in community-based organisations, universities and colleges in United States, Canada and New Zealand. They found 42% of gays surveyed had sometimes or often thought of suicide and 33% reported at least one attempt.<sup>448</sup> Correspondingly, Cochran and Mays reported that gay men were at greater risk for suicide symptoms and more than five times as likely to have attempted suicide.<sup>449</sup> Two of the five study participants reported that they thought of suicide as a means to free themselves from SSA and issues pertaining to it.

Belonging to a minority group that is often judged, ostracised, unaccepted and

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<sup>448</sup> Anthony R. D’Augelli, Scott L. Hershberger and Neil W. Pilkington, ‘Suicidality Patterns and Sexual Orientation-Related Factors Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths’, 31 (2001) 250-264 (pp.254-261)  
<[http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anthony\\_DAugelli/publication/11770449\\_Suicidality\\_patterns\\_and\\_sexual\\_orientationrelated\\_factors\\_among\\_lesbian\\_gay\\_and\\_bisexual\\_youths/links/0c96052781a399a6cf000000.pdf](http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Anthony_DAugelli/publication/11770449_Suicidality_patterns_and_sexual_orientationrelated_factors_among_lesbian_gay_and_bisexual_youths/links/0c96052781a399a6cf000000.pdf)> [Accessed 5 September 2015].

<sup>449</sup> Susan D. Cochran and Vickie M. Mays, ‘Lifetime Prevalence of Suicide Symptoms and Affective Disorders Among Men Reporting Same Sex Sexual Partners: Results from NHANES III’, *American Journal of Public Health*, 90 (2000), 573–578 (p.577)  
<<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1446201/>> [Accessed 8 September, 2015].

oppressed by others, who more closely reflect what is considered socially accepted,<sup>450</sup> was extremely painful for the participants. Evident throughout their discourses was how deeply they were affected by the various types of oppression and discrimination brought to bear on them because of their SSA. They were familiar with the notion that God delivers the oppressed,<sup>451</sup> they were oppressed, so why wasn't God delivering them by intervening and answering their prayers? One might ask, does God privilege one form of oppression over another? Or, is it the case that God is against people with homosexual desires and therefore sides with heterosexual persons and systems that oppresses them? Jones suggests that every possibility should be considered, when trying to determine the cause of oppression of one group of people by the hands of another. He suggests that divine racism (God favouring one group of people over the other) could be considered as a probable cause why Black people endure such misdistribution of suffering at the hands of their White oppressors.<sup>452</sup> Admittedly, the participants' predicament and unanswered prayers undoubtedly challenged my understanding of who I perceive God to be.

There are verses in the Bible that admonish us to call and God will answer,<sup>453</sup> but this was seemingly not the case for the participants. Jace stated, 'I need help, but how am I going to get it when God wouldn't even answer me when I pray (Jace)?' What happened to all of the preconceived claims that he would? Unanswered prayers and human limited understanding of God's operations in the world has been an issue of faith for decades.<sup>454</sup> Habakkuk the prophet was unable to understand God's unresponsive attitude to prayer and his seeming tolerance and indifference of evil. There is obvious tension in his cry, 'How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do

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<sup>450</sup> Quade Y. S. French, 2013, 'Adoption as a Contingency of Self-worth: An Integrative Approach to Self-esteem in Adopted Individuals', *Adoption Quarterly*, 16 (2013), 128-152 (p.135), Education Source, EBSCOhost, <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=87554887&site=ehost-liveviewed>> [Accessed 4 April 2017].

<sup>451</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. ix.

<sup>452</sup> Jones, p.9.

<sup>453</sup> Jer. 33:3. Ps. 50:15. Isa. 65:24.

<sup>454</sup> Neil Brown, 'New Atheism and the Problem of Evil', *Compass* 47 (2013), 29-32 (p.29) <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1366045294/fulltextPDF/A65A656C48DC4465PQ/21?accountid=14620>> [Accessed 19 April 2017].



not listen?’<sup>455</sup> In Psalm 73, Asaph also failed to comprehend God’s inattentiveness to the severe sufferings of the righteous at the hand of their oppressors. Asaph almost gave up on his relation with God when confronted with the harsh realities that God’s people were not immune from suffering, and were in comparison at times, probably worse off than the ungodly. The present world is very much inundated with evil, violence and suffering. Acts of terrorism claim the lives of great numbers of people and daily news reports are filled with calamities, catastrophes, crime, violence and suffering of all descriptions. Refugees are dying by the hundreds trying to procure a safer and better quality of life. Hence, the question concerning suffering and evil, that has disturbed people’s faith and beliefs down through the centuries, still remains a very pertinent and relevant one today.

Malik asked, ‘if God loves me, why did he let me have SSA and wouldn’t take it from me even though he sees how much I am suffering with it (Malik)?’ Walter Brueggemann says that the ‘quest for meaning inescapably surfaces the question of theodicy.’<sup>456</sup> Theodicy, basically wrestles with the question, how can an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent God permit evil and suffering in the world? Surely, using human reasoning ‘to vindicate the justice or goodness of God in the face of the evil and suffering found in the world’,<sup>457</sup> is nigh impossible. The arguments pertaining to this are generally represented by these claims: God may be powerful and good if there is no evil, God may be good and there can be evil if God is not powerful, God may be powerful and there can be evil if God is not good.<sup>458</sup>

Theologians have approached this difficult theological question in different ways. Paul Fiddes, for instance, approaches it by saying that the answer for human suffering and evil in the world lies in human free will.<sup>459</sup> He proposes that God respects human freedom in that he does not determine their lives or their lifestyle choices. To procure true freedom for the world, God limits himself and leaves it entirely up to

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<sup>455</sup> Ha.1:2.

<sup>456</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of the Old Testament Themes* (Louisville, KY, Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), p. 214.

<sup>457</sup> Nick Trakakis, ‘Theodicy: The Solution to the Problem of Evil, or Part of the Problem?’, *SOPHIA* 47 (2008), 161-191 (p.162) <DOI10.1007/s1184-D08-0063-6> [Accessed 18 April 2017].

<sup>458</sup> Brueggemann, p. 212.

<sup>459</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.33.

people to make their choices. However, ‘for human beings to be truly free persons they must have the possibility of refusing God’s purpose for their lives.’<sup>460</sup> Fiddes posits, that allocating this kind of freedom to humans, God is taking a “risk.”<sup>461</sup> This perhaps answers Jace’s question ‘why isn’t God doing anything about my homosexual feelings’ (Jace)? According to Fiddes, God’s perceived unwillingness to remove the homosexual feelings, as participants such as Jace so desperately desired, is perhaps due to the fact that he would be contravening the very freewill he offers them. It might be worthwhile also to consider that God perhaps has not intervened because there is nothing immoral about SSA. In itself, SSA is not a sinful act and a person who experiences homosexual inclinations is not morally culpable for such feelings. Brueggemann pointed out that throughout the history of God’s people in the Old Testament, he refused to be drawn into the theodicy crisis by offering logical explanations to their cries of protest or by answering their questions about his justice.<sup>462</sup>

Albeit, Malik remarked that ‘it would help a lot when I am struggling with these homosexual feelings if I could just find out where God is in this (Malik)’. When faced with overwhelming circumstances and situations, there is the desire to know where God is. C. S. Lewis wrestled with this very question of God’s presence<sup>463</sup> and so did Job<sup>464</sup> when they felt a sense of divine abandonment. Asking where is God in suffering is probably a better approach than asking why he allows suffering. When Asaph detected that God was present with his children even in their exile and disheartening experiences, his concept of God being unfair changed. It is worthy to note that a God who is with the sufferer and understands his or her predicament is much more beneficial than any formal theodicy and theological argument about suffering.

Suffering is very complicated, shrouded in mystery, and none of us can truly explain

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<sup>460</sup> Fiddes, p. 33.

<sup>461</sup> Fiddes, p. 33.

<sup>462</sup> Brueggemann, p. 213.

<sup>463</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2012), Amazon Kindle e-book, pp. 2-3.

<sup>464</sup> Job 23:8.

it. How God permits these five men to remain struggling and suffering with SSA, and not harken to their prayer is as much a mystery to me as it is to them. Not being able to be who their feelings tell them they are, because of the teachings in their churches, and the framework and worldview that is surrounding them increases their suffering. Considering the many complexities there are to theology, I dare not provide simplistic inadequate answers to the dilemmas these five men find themselves in. God does not flick a switch and change peoples' sexual orientation at the end of a prayer. However, God is not dispassionate and detached, neither does he remain at the periphery of the participants' existence. God's response to their theodicy crisis is his 'attending presence,'<sup>465</sup> suffering alongside, and empathising with these same-sex attracted men in their suffering. God's presence with Lamar is detected in this statement: 'I started getting confused, because how can I be dealing with this big sin quote un-quote, but yet I could still speak in tongues, and still experience God's presence and power in church and all of that stuff (Lamar).'

Sexual orientation may not change, similar to how Paul's thorn in the flesh did not go away,<sup>466</sup> but it is certain that in 'all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose'.<sup>467</sup> However, good must be defined in God's terms and not ours. It is possible for good things to come out of the participants' struggle and suffering, not only for them but for those presently struggling alongside them in obscurity and those yet to join the struggle. One thing we do know about God is that he revealed himself perfectly in the person of Jesus Christ and the cross provides the proper context for affirming that God is the God of self-giving sacrificing suffering love. His character is revealed in the world, as agape, a God who empties himself of power for the sake of love.<sup>468</sup>

The participants struggled with the unfairness of it all, they even entertained doubts about the fairness of God. Life with SSA seems grossly unfair, but fairness does not

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<sup>465</sup> Brueggemann, p. 214.

<sup>466</sup> 2 Cor. 12:9.

<sup>467</sup> Rom. 8:28.

<sup>468</sup> Phil. 2.

mean freedom from SSA or subjecting every individual to having homoerotic attractions. God has chosen 'attentiveness that provides care, sustenance, and compassion'<sup>469</sup> as one of the ways to demonstrate his fairness to these five Black men struggling with their faith and feelings and to respond to their theodicy questions. Even though their insurmountable problems cannot be solved by logical rational analysis, God is in solidarity with them and offers the support which they so desperately need.

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<sup>469</sup> Brueggemann, p. 214.

## Chapter Five: Needing Support

### Introduction

It's really hard, going through something like this. SSA is immense pressure and I've probably been on the verge of going crazy many times (Lamar).

The terminologies that Lamar used in the above statement are consistent with those used by the other participants, Malik, Cory, Jace and Harry. Based on what they said, they all indicated that lack of support was a problem. The BMC as other churches, is seen as a seat of social support. The participants therefore perceived their church to be a place where support would be readily available and accessible. This idea of perceived support, is described as the subjective judgement that providers will offer effective help during times of need.<sup>470</sup>

Social support is essential during times of difficulty or crisis and can come from a variety of sources including family, friends and organisations. It contributes to a better quality of life and serves as a buffer against the impact of adverse and stressful life events.<sup>471</sup> All people require support in one form or another and anticipate that support would be available to us when we need it. Individuals cope with undesirable and opposing situations better if they perceived that support would be available. Perceived support gives an individual the feeling of security and safety instead of feelings of isolation and rejection. The Black Church claims that God is for all people,<sup>472</sup> therefore it should be a sanctuary of both perceived and received support. Stigmatised populations such as the SSA men in this study consider such support especially important.

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<sup>470</sup> Monica E. Peek and others, 'Putting Theory into Practice: A Case Study of Diabetes-Related Behavioral Change Interventions on Chicago's South Side', *Health Promot Pract* 15 (2014), 405- 505 (p.9) <doi:10.1177/1524839914532292> [Accessed 27 May 2017].

<sup>471</sup> Cornne Mufioz-Plaza, Sandra Crouse Quinn and Kathleen A. Rounds, 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Students: Perceived Social Support in the High School Environment', *The High School Journal*, 85 (2002), 52-63 (p.54), in *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=2002-13307-004&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 24 November 2015].

<sup>472</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p.158.

From the data gathered, it was very evident that the participants in this study were craving social support from their churches. This implies that such support was either absent or insufficient. They anticipated but did not receive support, in that no specific supportive actions or advice was offered to assist them with the conflict they were experiencing between their SSA and their churches' teachings. This inadequacy to meet their needs left them disappointed, which is often the case when expectations of support exceed what is received.<sup>473</sup> The greatest challenge that the participants had was the understanding that the support anticipated from their church would not materialise owing to homophobia, and negative attitudes. Consequently, they struggled to reconcile their need for support with fear of BMC preconceptions. Their struggles with lacking social support will be discussed in this chapter under these headings: living in fear; going it alone; and trying to cope.

### **Living in fear**

There is currently change in public attitudes towards homosexuality, but the participants' stories revealed that the overall picture of homosexuality has remained negative within the BMCs where they attend and worship. This response on a questionnaire from a BMC minister illustrated the level of disdain and disgust directed at homosexuality and homosexuals:

If it is found out that two people are practicing homosexuality, the people in the church will not even give them a handshake. (SC-3)

Rejection and disassociation are ways that some people choose to deal with individuals that they are uncomfortable being around. Withholding the mere offer of a handshake to homosexuals or anyone attending his Church, is certainly not the response of Christians and the BMC. A theology of compassion seems to be more

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<sup>473</sup> Vernie C. Barnes, 'The Montserrat Volcanic Disaster: A Study of Meaning, Psycho-Social Effects, Coping and Intervention' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 2000), p.124.

appropriate.

Compassionate responses are what despised, scorned and rejected people are in need of. People with homosexual tendencies, like the leprous man in Mark's Gospel,<sup>474</sup> often lack the comfort of family and friends, and are without social and emotional support. It is notable that even though Jesus could have healed the leprous man from a distance, he looked past the man's disfiguring wasting body and touched him. Lovingly and compassionately. Jesus opposes any church whose response to homosexuals is one of resentment, prejudice and rejection.

In the absence of such compassion fear was the most commonly reported emotional response used by the participants to describe their lived experiences. Once they realised that they were same-sex attracted, they began living their lives with an underlying, pervasive sense of fear. They were confronted with associated feelings of isolation, identity conflict, and the realisation that they were belonging to yet another discriminated against minority group. The men in this study described their fears in multiple ways, but evidently what they feared most was people discovering that they were same-sex attracted. During the interview they were visibly distressed as they described living with the ever present fear that their secret may become known. This is what Lamar and Cory stated:

I would prefer to die than for anyone to find out that I am attracted to men.  
(Lamar)

I can't let it come out, it is a tormenting secret that I have to keep and carry to my grave. (Cory)

The fear of others finding out altered their behavior to the point where they became overly preoccupied with monitoring their interactions with others, their body language, conversations, the type of clothing they wore and the people they associated with.

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<sup>474</sup> Mark 1:41-42.

Hetrick and Martin,<sup>475</sup> and Smart and Wegner,<sup>476</sup> found in their studies that preoccupation with concealing stigma was prevalent amongst people with homosexual tendencies. However, the downside with concealment is that one is unable to access support and it often results in increased levels of anxieties and emotional stress. People with concealed stigmas experience what Smart and Wegner term 'a private hell.'<sup>477</sup> This is precisely how participants view their lived experiences.

Fear of SSA becoming known can also trigger defensive behaviours.<sup>478</sup> The participants resorted to using homophobic slurs and engaging in anti-social behaviour as a self-protective measure and to avert suspicion from themselves. Cory admitted:

I don't ever want my friends to know that I have homosexual feelings so I act as if I don't want to be associated with homosexuals and I also speak badly about them. (Cory)

Malik said:

I feel really bad joining in with my mates when they make fun of homosexuals and homosexuality, but if I don't they may become suspicious of me. (Malik)

This is not uncommon as Griffin proposes that maligning, degrading and denouncing homosexuality and homosexuals is a common practice among Black people who want to gain moral respectability and acceptance from a homophobic society.<sup>479</sup> Distancing themselves in this manner was one of the ways the participants in this study and other studies found to protect themselves from discovery.<sup>480</sup> Sadly, this was thought necessary despite the very nature of it potentially hurting someone else,

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<sup>475</sup> Emery S. Hetrick and Damien A. Martin, 'Developmental Issues and Their Resolution for Gay and Lesbian Adolescents', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 14 (1987) 25-43, (pp. 35-36), in *SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost*, <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=16265019&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 1 September 2015].

<sup>476</sup> Laura Smart and Daniel M. Wegner, 'The hidden Costs of Stigma', in *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, ed. by Todd F. Heatherton and others (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 220-242 (p. 232).

<sup>477</sup> Smart and Wegner, p. 229.

<sup>478</sup> Susan D. Cochran and Vickie M. Mays, 'Sexual Orientation and Mental Health,' In: Charlotte J. Patterson, Anthony R. D'Augelli (eds.). *Handbook of Psychology and Sexual Orientation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 204-222 (p.213).

<sup>479</sup> Griffin, p. 20.

<sup>480</sup> Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn and Rounds, p.56.



who like them has SSA.

All the participants were actively involved in their respective BMCs, and three of them held positions. The participants were afraid of the impact it would have on them, their families and their churches, if their secret was to come out. Concealing their SSA from their churches and others was their way of sparing themselves from being rejected and harassed as well as from personal and relational risk. Respondents in other studies have reported experiencing psychological distresses and the negative effects associated with hiding sexual orientation.<sup>481</sup> However, in this study the uncertainty of the outcome increased the participants' fears. They believed that by keeping their SSA hidden, they were preserving their relationship with family and friends, were maintaining their churches' respect and were preventing themselves from being looked upon differently. Cory said:

I am afraid for people in the church to know because a lot of them look up to me and they would be very, yeah, very disappointed in me. (Cory)

Fear of disappointing expectations is a common stressor for Black men in general, and more so for those with homosexual attractions. There are certain cultural, family, church and community expectations that Black men are expected to fulfil and beliefs and values they are expected to uphold.<sup>482</sup> They are expected to be physically strong, aggressive, providers, sexual prowess, attracted to women and father children.<sup>483</sup> These expectations deemed specific to Black males were communicated to them by important people in their lives and from childhood onwards their behaviour was monitored and assessed.

Furthermore, they were also fearful that congregants would wrongly assume they were something that they were not. Lamar explains:

I think that if a lot of people in the church with children, were to find out that

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<sup>481</sup> Carlos I. Pérez-Benítez, 'Cardiovascular Correlates of Disclosing Homosexual Orientation', *Stress & Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress*, 23 (2007), 141–152(p. 150), in *SPORTDiscus with Full Text*, EBSCOhost  
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=s3h&AN=25972779&site=ehost-live>>  
[Accessed 5 October 2015]. Quinn and others, p. 221.

<sup>482</sup> Icard, p.88.

<sup>483</sup> Errol Lamont Fields and others, p. 122.

a person has homosexual feelings would be funny with that person being around their children [...] Sometimes, people do think because you struggle with homosexual feelings, you are a paedophile, which is not the case. (Lamar)

Unfortunately, it is the common trend to associate homosexuality with paedophilia and sexual predators although homosexuals do not fit the profile anymore than heterosexuals.<sup>484</sup>

Griffin claims that it is a common occurrence for Black churches to reject, isolate and discriminate against congregants that are homosexually inclined.<sup>485</sup> He recounted that on one hand he was nurtured by the Black church's worship and affirmation of his blackness, while on the other he internalised shame and self-hatred because the Black church condemned him for being gay.<sup>486</sup> He puts forward a strong argument for gays and lesbian's full inclusion and participation in the church. Griffin's contribution is valuable, however it is important to note that he is a self-identified homosexual, and unlike the participants in this study, is convinced that there is nothing wrong with homosexual behaviours. As a matter of fact, he suppresses the voices of Black men, who like the participants, chose to live faithfully to God's word by forfeiting living a homosexual sexual lifestyle and nurturing their homosexual desires.

Clearly, this stance would be contentious for participants in this study who believe in the immorality of homosexuality and the likelihood of divine retribution resulting from such behaviour. The thought of God's punishment was often hinted at by the participants and contributed significantly to their life of fear. It was evident from their discourses that they were convinced that SSA on its own was not sinful, however, the attraction led to fantasies and lust which they felt were sinful. Harry admitted that he was seriously struggling with his desire for a man in his church, and

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<sup>484</sup> Carole Jenny, Thomas A. Roesler and Kimberly L. Poyer, 'Are Children at Risk for Sexual Abuse by Homosexuals?', *Pediatrics* 94 (1994), 41-44 (p.41), in MEDLINE, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cmedm&AN=8008535&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 13 May 2017].

<sup>485</sup> Griffin, pp.2-3.

<sup>486</sup> Griffin, pp.2-3.

Lamar said he thought about guys in ways that he considered to be sinful. It did not help that every mention about homosexual issues in their BMCs was always rooted in fear, giving them the impression that homosexuality was the greatest sin. That was how it was perceived by Malik and Lamar:

In church it felt like there is very much a hierarchy of sin and each sin had a category, and SSA was the worst one. (Malik)

From my understanding of it as a Christian, it's always been a big sin, it's always been the massive sin, you know, bigger than any other. (Lamar)

Participants felt if they satisfied their sexual needs in ways other than God intended, it was sure to unleash the rage and judgement of God upon them. This no doubt provoked a sense of vulnerability and personal distress for them as Lamar's statement so vividly expressed:

I felt that I could never have a homosexual experience, it was something I could never do, I was so scared you know, because it was like I'd get burn, God would come down and strike me dead, like I would die. (Lamar)

Amongst many other things, the Black church is known for its ability to instil the fear of God in congregants. This is evident especially in relation to moral issues like sexuality and more so homosexuality. The participants' understanding of sin and punishment co-existing in the Bible contributed to their fear of God punishing them if they were to explore their homosexual feelings in any way. Over the years BMCs have emphasised that God destroyed an entire city because of homosexuality. Despite dissenting views pertaining to the interpretation of that biblical text, rightly or wrongly interpreted, the participants were convinced that homosexuality played a great part in the destruction of Sodom.

Fear of supernatural punishment is not all negative; it could have positive features also. It has served as a deterrent and have steered people away from committing acts that are wrong and potentially detrimental to others. Individuals believing in supernatural punishment expect some form of divine retribution either immediately or in the future, whenever they act contrary to God. Several respondents in Schuck and Liddle's study believed that they would be rejected by God and sent to hell as

punishment for their homosexual acts.<sup>487</sup> This is in line with what Lamar felt after he succumbed to temptation. He said, 'I felt really afraid, it felt as if God was just going to kill me, strike me dead right then and there (Lamar)'. This sense of the imminent judgement was echoed by most of the participants.

The use of biblical text as a means to instil fear into the congregants could threaten the freedom of those with SSA. Kelly Brown Douglas equates the modern use of biblical text by Blacks against homosexuals who did not conform to their beliefs, to Whites using the Bible as a tool to justify and control the slaves.<sup>488</sup> The emergence of the Black church was a way to help clarify some of these myths, which individuals with SSA are now being subjugated to in the said church.

Additionally, it was the commonly held belief of various religious groups that the HIV and AIDS virus was direct punishment from God for illicit sexual practices.<sup>489</sup> This assumption could be attributed to the fact that most major religions teach that sexual activities are to take place within marriage between a man and woman. Although it is true that sexual activities that deviate from fidelity in a heterosexual marriage could lead to contracting the virus, it is perhaps absurd to believe that HIV and AIDS are God's method of punishing individuals for deviating from religious norms of sexuality. If this is the case, then all diseases would have to be considered as punishment from God for some act of sin. A combination of all these factors kept the participants fearful and the various fears they experienced were barriers that kept them from seeking the perceived support.

Several ministers indicated on the questionnaires that they knew there were people with homosexual tendencies in their midst, that: 'fear the consequences of being discovered (SC-1)', 'fear being ostracised (M-1)', 'fear being ex-communicated (SC-2)',

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<sup>487</sup> Kelly D. Schuck and Becky J. Liddle, 'Religious Conflicts Experienced by Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals', *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Psychotherapy*, 5 (2001), 63-82 (p.70) <[http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J236v05n02\\_07](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J236v05n02_07)> [Accessed 04 August 2015].

<sup>488</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p.96.

<sup>489</sup> Mark R. Kowalewski, 'Religious constructions of the AIDS crisis', *Sociological Analysis*, 51 (1990), 91-96 (p. 93), in ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000823796&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 10 October 2015].

and 'fear resentment and rejection (M-6)'. Yet, no help was forthcoming for them. According to the participants, their churches never gave the slightest indication that they were willing to engage with or even offer support to anyone with homosexual issues. Instead they heard statements that deterred them from seeking support. Cory lamented:

I felt really bad when the minister kept saying that he hoped that there were no men in his church who are loving men. (Cory)

Congregants experiencing homoerotic feelings, hearing statements similar to the one above, may, like the participants suffer from fear-induced silence and have had to deal with their fears, internal turmoil and struggle in silence.

On the questionnaire a minister responded by saying:

If men in church have homosexual feelings, it would be better for them to keep quiet about it. (M.9)

Keep quiet! That was the same poor inadequate pastoral advice that the crowd offered blind Bartimaeus,<sup>490</sup> who was living in the shadows of his limitations needing practical support to help him get to Jesus. Keep quiet, is reflective of our modern world's response to the cries of refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers fleeing hunger, harm and death. Keep quiet, has been the command given to Black people for decades as they sought the respect and dignity which they deserved as humans created in the likeness and image of God.<sup>491</sup> Keep quiet, was the subtle suggestion that a very influential Black minister gave me when he asked, is it worth pursuing this study with the potential risk that it could have on your ministry? There are the risks of being labelled condoning, being misjudged and criticised.

Bartimaeus took the risk and it paid off. Jesus' response was 'bring him to me.' His attentive, compassionate action challenged the crowd that day and should challenge BMCs today. Jesus' message was clear, hurting, struggling, discriminated against individuals, like the participants in this study, should be heard and not forced to

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<sup>490</sup> Mark 10:46-52.

<sup>491</sup> Cohen, p.72.

remain silent and in obscurity due to fear. They cannot receive the support required to make their lives tolerable, if they are not allowed to speak about their struggle.

### Going it Alone

The importance of social support was mentioned earlier. The lack of readily available social support for sexual minority individuals, is a contributing factor to the social isolation and alienation that they experienced.<sup>492</sup> Family, community and church are usually great sources of support. The participants admitted to having close family ties, a number of friends and were members of fairly large BMC congregations, yet, they did not receive the necessary social support. Researchers claim that Black individuals who are same-sex attracted, often lack social support, mainly because of the negative attitudes in Black communities towards people who are homosexually inclined.<sup>493</sup>

Generally, families are the first people that most individuals turn to for support in adversities. However, despite their internal conflicts, numerous inhibitions and need for emotional support, the participants felt that they could not speak to family members about their SSA. Partly because they were brought up in Christian homes, attended BMCs with their families all their lives, and have heard homosexuality spoken of in very negative and derogatory ways. BMCs play a substantial role in shaping attitudes toward same-sex behaviour. Disclosing to their families that they were same-sex attracted, to them, would have been one of the worst things that could be done. It has been indicated in earlier studies that Black individuals from religious backgrounds, who are same-sex attracted, are more likely to experience disappointment and disapproval from their families.<sup>494</sup> It is known that Black families

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<sup>492</sup> Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn and Rounds, p.54.

<sup>493</sup> Pitt, 'Killing the Messenger', p.58. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 105. Griffin, p. 20.

<sup>494</sup> Vickie M. Mays and others, 'African American Families in Diversity: Gay men and Lesbians as Participants in Family Networks', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 29 (1998), 73-87 (p.75), in PsycINFO, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=1998-04433-005&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 5 October 2015].

are prone to react negatively to family members disclosing a homosexual identity.<sup>495</sup> Judging from Lamar's interview, it seems particularly difficult for some Black parents to find out their child is homosexually inclined:

It was something that I never dare speak to my family about. I think I remember my mum saying one time, if any of her sons or children were gay, she would hire someone to kill them or she would probably beat them to death or stuffs like that. (Lamar)

Sentiments like these are bound to generate fear and predispose individuals with SSA to remain silent. It also demonstrates the dilemma that Black parents find themselves in when they are confronted with the possibility of having a child with SSA.

It is remarkable that even Black adults are unwilling to risk telling their families about their homosexual feelings. Harry, was in the 45-55 age group, yet he could not muster up the courage to tell his mother about his SSA:

My mother is a typical Black Christian woman who would disown me and have nothing else to do with me if she was to find out that I am attracted to men. I am so afraid of that, so I pray that she never finds out, because I would not be able to deal with the pain of her rejecting me. (Harry)

Rejection by one's family of origin was considered to be the most significant risk of disclosure.<sup>496</sup> Participants shared that they exerted great amounts of effort camouflaging their sexual preference and cultivating a façade of heterosexuality in the presence of their families, especially when asked awkward questions about relationships, marriage and having children. They admitted that it was deceptive, distressful and burdensome not disclosing, but felt that the psychological upheavals they experienced were easier to tolerate than the potential conflict that disclosure would cause.

Perhaps reluctance to disclose within traditional Black families, is partly due to the fact that 'ethnic minority groups may view homosexuality as antithetical to issues of

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<sup>495</sup> Mays and others, p.75.

<sup>496</sup> Mays and others, p. 75.

family, ethnic identity and the preservation of minority communities.<sup>497</sup> It was interesting to learn that most of the participants had hoped that they would have married and have children. However, any prospects they had of getting married were adversely affected by their attraction to men and their religious convictions that sex outside of marriage was wrong and same-sex marriage could never be an option:

I struggle because I am at the stage of my life where my friends are getting married, having babies and I don't have anybody in my life so I'm lonely, cause I am not comfortable going to that stage with a girl because then I have to tell her, disclose all of these feelings, and if it is a man, well that's wrong, and I can't go down that avenue. (Jace)

This was the dilemma which most of them faced.

One of the distinctive features of Black churches since their inception, is their ability to provide support for members and the Black community in general.<sup>498</sup> Black churches, wherever located, are known to be conduits for various types of support.<sup>499</sup> People involved in the BMC, generally see it as a source of support and anticipate that help would be forthcoming when needed.<sup>500</sup> Regrettably, it appears BMCs have succeeded in detaching themselves from the struggles of those facing hardship and marginalisation on account of their sexuality. Membership did not afford the participants the assurance that they could count on the church and find within it an accumulation of supportive ties that they could trust. Cory lamented:

It is a very lonely world when you want to lead a godly life, when you've got something, and you don't have anybody that you can speak to about your personal sexual struggles. (Cory)

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<sup>497</sup> Mays and others, p.75.

<sup>498</sup> Katherine Quinn and others, 'Correlates of Internalized Homonegativity Among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men', *AIDS Education & Prevention*, 27 (2015), 212-226 (p.221), in Education Abstracts, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eax&AN=102882123&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 6 October 2015]. Billingsley, (1999), p. 185.

<sup>499</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 272.

<sup>500</sup> Donald W. Yorgason, James P. Whelan and Andrew W. Meyers, 'Perceived Religious Support for Problem Gambling: Does Church Doctrine Influence Help-seeking?', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 15, (2012) 87-102, (p.95), in Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=70332012&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 14 December 2015].



Individuals with SSA would be more prone to disclosing it if they were sure that there would be available support.<sup>501</sup> Cone's criticism of the White church for failing on all counts to be a visible manifestation to the word of God's intention for humanity<sup>502</sup> could also be said of BMCs. The men with SSA in their midst have seen no visible evidence that God is concerned with their struggle and his companionship is a surety that he is for them and not against.

During one of the darkest hours of his life on earth, Jesus looked to the disciples, his closest friends for human comfort and support.<sup>503</sup> Desiring companionship and support he asked them to watch with him for just one hour. It is written that their spirits were truly willing and wanted to be there for him, but they fell asleep nonetheless. Their need for sleep proved too much. I found myself in a similar situation one night when the young man came to my door in a quandary about his sexuality, looking to me for answers. I wanted to offer him some form of comfort, but found myself ill equipped, and I came up short. Jesus went through his momentous ordeal, his Gethsemane lacking the social and emotional support he desired because his support group did not know how. Sleep, silence, pretence may be appropriated as masks when faced with such a situation.

Whilst hanging on the cross, facing death, unable to sense the divine presence, Jesus cried out, 'my God my God, why have you forsaken me?'<sup>504</sup> Happily for us the story did not end there. All that transpired during and after the crucifixion, clearly indicates that God is present in every event of human lives, including death. Jesus promised, 'I am with you always.'<sup>505</sup> He will never fall asleep on his promise and regardless of sexual orientation, race or any other issue, no one will ever need to go through their nights of Gethsemane void of support. Cone reiterates this in his idea of a God of all

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<sup>501</sup> Nathan Daniel Doty and others, 'Sexuality Related Social Support Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39 (2010), 1134-1147 (p. 1143), in ERIC, EBSCOhost  
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ893409&site=ehost-live>>  
[Accessed 07 November 2015].

<sup>502</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p.71.

<sup>503</sup> Matt 26:36-41.

<sup>504</sup> Matt 27:46.

<sup>505</sup> Matt 28:20.

people and his attentiveness to 'the community of the oppressed.'<sup>506</sup> More so a God of all circumstances could be claimed as means to liberation from going it alone with SSA.

The Black men in this study felt they were marginalised and oppressed not only by their SSA but also by their silence. Just having the conversation with them and allowing them to bring to speech their own experiences was itself a liberative and reparative exercise. Giving voice to the secret buried within them for decades, provided them with psychological relief and contributed to their empowerment and transformation. Liberation is in part a story telling process. Theologian Nelle Morton recognised and noted the liberative and cathartic power of "hearing to speech," in consciousness-raising sessions where women gathered to tell their individual stories and narratives.<sup>507</sup> Morton proposes that hearing the voices of those often silenced and unable to speak for themselves is a freeing experience. Sharing their stories empowered women to speak out against patriarchal oppression and bring about change. The homophobic attitudes in BMCs, that stifle and silence the voices of Black men struggling with SSA, are being informed and guided by the narratives beneath them. However, by giving voice to their own narratives, the men gained internal liberation<sup>508</sup> and challenged the dominant narratives implemented by those in power<sup>509</sup> who are trying to define their lives. Through this narrative they have initialised their liberation, allowed for discussion in order to break stigma and to give hope and support to others so they should not have to go it alone.

### **Trying to Cope**

When a variety of stressors 'tax or exceed the adaptive resources of an individual,'<sup>510</sup> he or she needs adequate coping strategies to deal with them. The individual's coping

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<sup>506</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p.35.

<sup>507</sup> Nelle Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), pp.127-128.

<sup>508</sup> James Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2005), p.80.

<sup>509</sup> Morton, p. 210.

<sup>510</sup> Sondra Elice Solomon, 'Psychological Considerations: Visible Distinction and Congenital Anomalies of the Upper Extremities', in *Congenital Anomalies of the Upper Extremity: Etiology and Management*, ed. by Donald R. Laub, Jr. (New York: Springer, 2015), 73-84 (p.75).

responses will either limit or exasperate the extent to which stressors influences and impacts their wellbeing. It is not unusual for everyone to experience some level of stress in their lives. However, individuals with SSA tend to experience greater levels compared with those who are not homosexually inclined.<sup>511</sup> This could be attributed to having to deal with stressors that are unique to their sexual orientation and attributes that are regarded as discrediting, inferior and a departure from the norm.<sup>512</sup> They also experience heightened levels of stress, perhaps due to the stigma that is associated with homosexuality.<sup>513</sup> In this case, the participants' stress was compounded by complications associated with religious beliefs and teachings that are incompatible with their SSA.

Considering these assumptions, individuals who are homosexually inclined find it necessary to employ positive coping strategies to internally and externally manage the stressors they confront.<sup>514</sup> This study found that a number of stressors were likely to be prevalent in two of the participants' significant social environments, namely, the Black church and Black community. One of the participant's main stressors was trying to reconcile their SSA with their Christian beliefs. Unfortunately, most BMCs have not actuated their supportive potential by putting systems in place to help individuals with SSA cope with issues pertaining to faith and homosexuality. The seventeen BMC ministers and leaders who responded to the questionnaires stated that they were aware of the existence of homosexuality and same-sex attracted persons in their churches but had no framework in place to support them. In other

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<sup>511</sup> Ilan H. Meyer, 'Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence', *Psychological Bulletin*, 129 (2003), 674– 697 (p.679), in *PsycARTICLES, EBSCOhost* <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=2003-99991-002&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 9 September 2015].

<sup>512</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (England: Penguin Books, 1963), p.12.

<sup>513</sup> Laura Smart and Daniel M. Wegner, 'The Hidden Costs of Stigma', in *The Social Psychology of Stigma*, ed. by Todd F. Heatherton and others (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 220–242 (p. 220).

<sup>514</sup> Katey A. Nicolai, Tyler Laney and Amy H. Mezulis, 'Different Stressors, Different Strategies, Different Outcomes: How Domain-Specific Stress Responses Differentially Predict Depressive Symptoms Among Adolescents', *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 42 (2013) 1183-1193, (p.1184), in *Education Source, EBSCOhost* <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=89094008&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 11 November 2015].

words, they are not coping with the reality.

When asked 'How would you respond to a member of your congregation who tells you he has homoerotic feelings'? A minister who was over an organisation consisting of eighty-five churches responded by saying:

I would first consult with those who are qualified to manage this situation, inside or outside of our organisation, then establish a framework that would help the individual with those feelings. (M-1)

He further stated:

This is not a simple problem; it challenges fundamentals and needs guidance from God to deal with it. Our BMCs, rather than being labelled condoning or homophobic, find it easier to just shy away from it. (M-1)

In other words, BMCs seemingly practice the coping strategy used by some people when confronted by a major disaster that Barnes<sup>515</sup> termed as 'aware avoidance.' They seem to be aware of the situation but avoid it, thus confirming what the participants said:

It wasn't spoken about, it was kept very silent and secretive. (Harry)

Certain things are taboo and certain things don't get talked about, especially sexual topics. (Cory)

Homosexuality has just always been a no touch subject, something that was probably just brushed under the carpet of the church, it was never addressed. (Lamar)

The majority of the ministers simply answered no, to the question, 'Is there any pastoral framework in your church or organisation which deals specifically with the needs of people with homosexual feelings'? The ministers who elaborated further made statements such as:

There is not a particular framework in our church or organisation; however, when there is such a situation, it becomes a pastoral issue to be dealt with. (M-7)

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<sup>515</sup> Vernie Barnes, pp. 229 – 230.

No, but the framework would be to counsel with the individual with a view of correcting what is considered a deviant practice. (M-6)

Presently, we have no specific pastoral framework that deal with homosexuality – it would be dealt with on an individual basis as the need arises. (M-5)

We respond to homosexuality in the same way as other sexual struggle. (M-3)

There is no pastoral framework in our church organisation which deals specifically with the needs of people with homosexual feelings, however, there is counselling available for anyone who needs it. (M-2)

BMCs in the UK are seemingly unprepared and unequipped, both in their resources and knowledge to readily offer the type of support individuals with SSA need.

In this study it appears as if many were oblivious to the enormity of the issue of homosexuality within the church. Homosexuality is the only church prohibition that has gained such worldwide attention, support and has so many forceful advocates and ardent defenders. There is a range of influences that challenges the theological positions and beliefs that addresses homosexuality.<sup>516</sup> Issues relating to homosexuality and homosexual persons are pervasive and vehemently contested. BMCs cannot remain oblivious to the fact that whether they want to or not, they will be pulled into the conversation and called upon to defend their positions.

Furthermore, individuals in churches struggling with SSA and their faith are being exposed to pro-gay suggestions in the mainstream media. They often receive encouragement to give expression to their homosexual urges. They are also confronted with the view that the biblical texts prohibiting homosexuality are

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<sup>516</sup> Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), pp. 421-422.

outdated. They are being offered new ways of interpreting them, and there are gay-positive churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church,<sup>517</sup> Good News,<sup>518</sup> and Dignity,<sup>519</sup> affirming both the individual's Christianity and homosexuality. Hence, the importance of and the need for support systems in churches and for church engagement in the discussions.

The pivotal argument in the topic of homosexuality is whether by forbidding same-sex attracted Black individuals from sexually expressing their love due to the confinement of religion, is like again regressing to the bonds of slavery. Douglas explains, such prevention and labelling as sinful, strips Blacks of their identity by promoting the view of white heterosexuality and reverting to a time when blackness was seen to be even abhorrent to God. A removal of such a ban and full acceptance may lessen the struggle and therefore negate the need for such a support framework in the first place. This however will then mean that the BMC must become liberal and go against its beliefs and biblical stance. It ultimately means going against what participants themselves also believe in.<sup>520</sup>

Trying to cope, the participants have enacted strategies to help them function better, manage their behaviours and handle their given situations. One such strategy was to confide in a few selected persons who they knew were also experiencing SSA. These persons became their primary providers of social support and a coping resource and was the most frequent form of coping that the participants found helpful. These friendships are usually formed based on the fact that they struggle against similar social pressures and often share the same fate.<sup>521</sup> The study participants admitted

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<sup>517</sup> Rodriguez and Ouellette, pp. 333-346.

<sup>518</sup> Thumma, pp. 333-345.

<sup>519</sup> Glenn Wagner and others, 'Integration of One's Religion and Homosexuality: A Weapon Against Internalized Homophobia?', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 26 (1994), 91-110, in SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost, <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=9501161172&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 24 October 2015].

<sup>520</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blue Slant* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), p.109.

<sup>521</sup> Saliha Altiparmak and others, 'The Relationship Between Quality of Life and Social Support in Homosexuals Living in Izmir, Turkey', *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 36 (2012), 394-395 (p.394), *Business Source Elite*, EBSCOhost <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bsh&AN=78164094&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 16 May 2017].

that apart from a small number of trusted same-sex attracted persons, they had no other substantial social support:

Meeting people along the way who were struggling with the same issue, I could speak to them about it, only them, because I wouldn't speak to anyone else who probably wasn't going through the struggle [...] we understand each other. (Lamar)

Studies investigating coping strategies used by sexual minority individuals indicated that confiding in others, especially non-heterosexuals, was beneficial in responding to and coping with homosexual issues.<sup>522</sup> Participants in this study found that they were useful, in that they were able to understand, empathise and identify with the stresses associated with having SSA. It lessened their feelings of isolation and loneliness that are frequently associated with keeping personal secrets,<sup>523</sup> and provided an environment where the participants were able to be themselves and be accepted without prejudice and stigmatisation.

Albeit, the participants found that relying heavily on their same-sex attracted peers presented its own challenges and was not always adequate or ideal. Supportive relationships involving people with the same or similar issues are normally beneficial, but in some cases, if appropriate distances are not established and maintained, the relationship could become problematic.

Reliance on God was another prominent coping strategy that the participants utilised. They expressed that:

Personally, believing that God has revealed himself to me is what helped me the most....reading the Bible it helps me a lot [...]to resist and keep self control intact. (Cory)

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<sup>522</sup> Cornne Mufioz-Plaza, Sandra Crouse Quinn and Kathleen A. Rounds, 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Students: Perceived Social Support in the High School Environment', *The High School Journal*, 85 (2002), 52-63 (p.55), in *PsycINFO*, EBSCOhost<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=2002-13307-004&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 24 November 2015].

<sup>523</sup> Pachankis, John E., 'The Psychological Implications of Concealing a Stigma: A Cognitive Affective Behavioral model', *Psychological Bulletin*, 133 (2007), 328-345 (p.334), <<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ755872&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 10 September 2015]

I pray throughout the day and I cope by just asking God for grace. (Malik)

SSA is something that I struggle with daily but ah, I just thank God for the blood of Christ, for his grace and I find that his grace is sufficient each day. (Harry)

Participants used the resources that their religious experiences provided, such as prayer, fasting and reading the Scriptures. They spoke of relying heavily on God's grace and trusting in his power, although there were times when they had to search through stressful experiences to find positive religious meanings in order to cope. One participant told himself that God intended for him to have SSA but did not want him to engage in homosexual acts. Although he still regarded SSA as an unwanted aspect in his life, he expressed that it lessened his anxiety to know that it was within his power to act or to refrain from acting on the attraction. It could be that the sense of being in control of his actions allowed him to feel better about himself and enhance his ability to cope and deal with both external and internal conflict. Being in control is like liberating oneself and not behaving as if none action is a divine command.<sup>524</sup> Interestingly, there is a growing awareness that religion is an important dimension of the coping process and scholars are beginning to investigate developing coping strategies that include spiritual beliefs and practices.<sup>525</sup> Black people have been aware of these powerful coping tools for decades.

Black churches have a unique way of connecting with attendees in addressing their issues and offering social support, in the spirit of kinship. Traditionally, Black churches provided a haven, a buffer for the negative experiences Black people faced. Retreating to the church, the haven that God provided, made it easier to cope with the oppression from the wider society. However, it is not working for this particular group of Black people with same-sex attraction as they also felt oppressed within the church. The five participants wanted to receive church support as they struggled with living obediently to the church's teachings and their homosexual drives. Perceiving

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<sup>524</sup> Pinn, *Why Lord*, p. 157.

<sup>525</sup> Kent D. Drescher and David W. Foy, 'Spirituality and Trauma Treatment: Suggestions for Including Spirituality as a Coping Resource,' *NCP Clinical Quarterly*, 5 (1995), un-numbered p.1, para-1 <<http://napa.networkofcare.org/veterans/library/article.aspx?id=384&cat=473>> [Accessed 1 September 2015].



that BMCs were in a position to offer the needed social support, Jace made this emotional appeal asking for it:

I would like the church to know that the men struggling with Christianity and sexuality issues are your brothers, your sons, your fathers. They need your help and are in positions of need. They are followers, your ushers and your cleaners. They also hold leadership positions like deacons and pastors. It is your responsibility to be your brother's keeper and give them the support they need. (Jace)

The interviews revealed that the participants' perception of church support was a safe non-threatening, non-judgemental environment where they could freely talk and ask questions pertaining to sexuality. Empathic listening and understanding, acceptance, to be treated as any other church brother, dialogue and open discussions about sexuality, love, pastoral care and advice were also aspects of the support needed. However, given the fact that the participants were hiding, lying, feeling dirty and ashamed because of the homophobic attitudes in their BMCs, what they were asking for seemed unrealistic. The Black church members, groomed on homophobic rhetoric, had developed an early and strong disliking for homosexuality. Researchers like Wilkinson believes that anti-gay attitudes start developing in the gender socialisation process where males are taught what behaviours typify masculinity and those considered feminine that should be avoided.<sup>526</sup>

Fields and others also discovered that the disdain that Black respondents have for homosexuality was established early and stemmed from Black cultural expectations of masculinity.<sup>527</sup> Consequently the problem of homophobia within BMCs is deep-rooted and complicated, perhaps fraught with ancestral memories of same-sex sexual abuse and rape carried out during slavery, at times even church sanctioned. Ward claims that homophobia began with and is closely related to the history of Black

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<sup>526</sup> Wayne W. Wilkinson, 'Authoritarian Hegemony, Dimensions of Masculinity, and Male Antigay Attitudes', *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 5 (2004), 121-131 (p. 128), in PsycARTICLES, EBSCOhost  
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pdh&AN=2004-15683-004&site=ehost-live>> [Accessed 25 September 2015].

<sup>527</sup> Fields and others, p. 129.

slavery and the influence of racism.<sup>528</sup> This embedded homophobia in Black churches must be confronted and addressed if individuals with SSA are ever going to receive any sort of substantial support from BMCs.

BMCs, either verbalise hostility toward homosexuals and homosexuality or simply keep silent on the issue. Why is it so difficult for BMCs to get beyond being reticent and closed, to genuinely engaging in conversations addressing homosexual issues? If God is on the side of the oppressed as Cone suggests<sup>529</sup> and these men are being oppressed because of their sexuality, should not the church be on the same side that God is on? It is crucial for BMCs ministers and leaders to engage in dialogue and to critically evaluate their views about homosexuality and their approach to same-sex attracted individuals. Fortunately for me, conducting this study, afforded me the opportunity to engage with a range of viewpoints on homosexuality and that has enabled me to take a more informed theological position that is no longer masked by homophobia.

Given the BMCs judgemental view on homosexuality, it may seem ludicrous for the participants to expect them to provide a non-judgemental, empathic space, as a judgement has already been made before listening to them. However, what is at stake here is not changing the church's stance on homosexuality, or the participants for that matter. It is the participants themselves who see SSA as doctrinally wrong, while experiencing the BMC as endorsing homophobic attitudes. Although the BMC's teaching can be seen to inform attitudes to homosexuality and SSA, the teaching is not determinative of such attitudes. In other words, even if teaching remains in place about SSA being sin, this need not lead to homophobic attitudes. The existing homophobia in BMCs and their tendency to penalise and treat people with SSA differently, greatly concerned the participants and kept them from disclosing their SSA and seeking support from the church. Jace said, 'I've seen the church react to people who would have my similar struggle, so I was very uncomfortable [...], I struggle a lot in my life because of this' (Jace).

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<sup>528</sup> Ward, p.495.

<sup>529</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. xii.

The participants suggested that in the BMC SSA have been amplified and regarded as the “biggest” and most “serious” sin, and the questionnaire responses from several male ministers confirmed that it is seen this way. However, the BMC can maintain a non-judgemental approach to pastoral action alongside a non-affirmatory stance on SSA by reminding itself through teaching and pastoral action that all sin is equal, ‘all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23). The Bible does not support a gradation of sin and the BMC should refrain from viewing SSA as a sin more sinful or greater than any other sin.

It is important for the BMC to demonstrate and practice consistency of pastoral action when dealing with individuals who commit sin. If the BMC can embrace and love people guilty of adultery, for example, without demonising or ostracising them, then it is called to embrace and love people who are same-sex attracted in exactly the same way. It should not propose different standards of sexual morality, one for heterosexuals and another for individuals who are same-sex attracted. If the BMC’s practice is to be consistent, it must embrace men who experience SSA without judgement. Furthermore, if the BMC makes the distinction between thinking about sin (e.g. thinking about adultery, stealing, murder) and actually committing sin (e.g. committing murder, theft etc.), then to be consistent, it may also need to make the distinction between “thinking” about homosexual activity (i.e. same-sex attraction) and “engaging” in homosexual practices (i.e. same-sex activity). Homosexual inclinations in themselves are not a sin. These distinctions and methods of consistency can only be brought about by more discussions within the BMC regarding SSA and homosexuality. The participants’ desire for dialogue was to hopefully bring about a change in the church’s homophobic attitude and the treatment meted out to congregants with homosexual tendencies. Several of the BMC ministers who took part in the questionnaires, have stated their interest in getting to know more on the subject and this is a positive sign.

My views and beliefs about homosexuality were profoundly shaped by the Black culture and the BMCs that I grew up in. Homosexuality was always conveyed as a very grave sin. Whenever it was spoken about in the Black community and amongst peers, derogatory and demeaning terms were used to describe homosexuality and

those who practiced it. To be called a homosexual or anything referring to homosexuality, even in jest, was enough to cause strong arguments and physical altercations. I was never comfortable being around people who were homosexuals, even if they were just thought to be so I distanced myself.

During high school one of my classmates confided in me that she was a lesbian. She was very confused, felt alone and needed to tell someone. We were both Christians, she valued our friendship and she perceived that I was in a position to give her some sort of support. Unfortunately, that was not the case. Immediately, I went into self-preservation mode and the only thing I thought to say to her was that I could no longer associate myself with her because I did not want people to question my sexuality whenever her lesbianism became known. My response devastated her and I have regretted it to this day.

Dialoguing with and listening to the participants' lived experiences offered tremendous insights into their struggle with SSA and challenged some of my perceptions about homosexuality and same-sex attracted persons. My theological position is that homosexual sexual expressions are sinful and not God's intention for human sexuality. Although that has not changed, my homophobic attitude, judgemental approach and typical stereotyping of people with homosexual tendencies have definitely changed.

The participants were in need of support from BMCs and this need was echoed throughout this study. It was an enormous challenge, experiencing SSA, whilst at the same time trying to be faithful to the teachings of the church. The BMCs response to their cry for support is crucial.

On the questionnaire one of the BMC ministers responded by saying:

It sounds cruel, but I feel that it's better to reject the homosexual person from the church to keep the whole church from becoming corrupted. (M-4)

An advice of this kind is quite disheartening considering that it is coming from people who should understand the devastating impact of rejection. It was in the context of exclusion and rejection that Black peoples' understanding of the gospel was shaped. They struggled against being dehumanised, being exploited by the strong, and being viewed as inferior, while another ethnic group was valued and viewed as superior.<sup>530</sup> If the BMC's response is to reject one individual over another, it will certainly overshadow Black people's witness to a God who is on the side of and in solidarity with the oppressed.<sup>531</sup>

Rejection would only magnify the distresses that individuals with SSA may be experiencing. Presumably, they are already dealing with a number of shame-based self-esteem issues, so it is highly possible that to exclude them from their place of worship would be to affirm their unacceptability. Wimberly explains that such 'exclusion breaks the interpersonal bridge that people need in order to feel loved and accepted.'<sup>532</sup> Black people cannot afford to depict the Jesus of the gospel in ways other than one who associates himself with outcasts and sinners.<sup>533</sup> Jesus as the 'first lynchee,'<sup>534</sup> associates with people who are seemingly only fit for lynching. Those considered undesirable and not the right sort of people for the Church, are the very people that Jesus invites to come in.

The BMC like other church organisations, has the right to have rules and theological convictions, even if everyone may not be in agreement with them. BMCs also have the right to reject the notion that affirming homosexual behaviour and practices is the only alternative available to them. However, whatever stance is taken, churches do not have the right to be homophobic, by being abusive in their approach. BMCs are generally considered evangelical conservative denominations and believe that sex outside of heterosexual marriage is forbidden and that homosexual practice is

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<sup>530</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 115.

<sup>531</sup> Jeremiah A White Jr, 'Black Theology/ Womanist Theology in Dialogue', in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education*, ed. by Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas (Eugene, OR: WIPF and Stock Publishers, 2010), 251-264 (p.256).

<sup>532</sup> Edward P. Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth: Preaching and Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), p.84.

<sup>533</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p. xiii.

<sup>534</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, p. 158.

against the will of God and against scripture. However, a theological conviction should never be a catalyst to treat someone badly or a reason for rejecting them. Whilst holding true to church convictions, the first move is not to judge people because of their homosexual feelings. I felt a certain tension between wanting, on the one hand, to help them resist the temptation to engage in homosexual sex, but on the other, I wanted to make these men feel welcome and included in the church fellowship. I aimed, above all, to avoid compounding the sense of shame and sense of exclusion they felt, which would have driven them to silence and caused them to hide. Therefore, in light of my conversations with these men and my own theological reflection, I concluded that rejection and judgemental attitudes are certainly not appropriate responses to the issue of SSA. Every human is valuable to God and should be seen and treated as such. It grieved me that there are seats at God's table that are vacant because the church rejected the would be occupants because they felt they were too repugnant to have a seat.

It is important to consider the extent to which encouraging men with SSA to resist acting on their sexual desires is a legitimate pastoral response. One must find an appropriate balance between upholding a traditional church teaching and offering sensitive pastoral support. Pastoral support should be primarily about empathic listening, rather than prescribing behaviour. I hope that this present study will encourage the BMC, while seeking to be faithful to fundamental biblical convictions, to offer Black men with SSA a non-judgemental empathic space. It should be recognised that this approach, however constructive in theory, is wrought with practical tensions, especially considering that many of these men themselves believe SSA is sinful. These tensions can be addressed only through sensitive and compassionate listening, rather than any dogmatic statements.

Nevertheless, I believe that it is permissible to uphold a traditional teaching and stance regarding homosexuality. This teaching, however, needs to be expressed in a loving caring framework of pastoral concern that genuinely seeks the well-being of all concerned. The answers on the questionnaires revealed that there was no framework in place that was available to same-sex attracted individuals. People struggling with SSA and living in obedience to the teachings of their church, are

dealing with hard issues, and care must be taken to ensure that the support that churches offer does not unwittingly reinforce the sense of exclusion and shame felt by many people with SSA. I believe that compassion would be the appropriate theological response to members of the church who wish to stay in the church but have SSA. Being compassionate to people with SSA is not about indulging them in a behaviour that the church deems to be wrong or saying it is alright to go and live out their carnal desires.<sup>535</sup> Grenz said that the Lord's mandate to the church is to welcome homosexual persons on the same basis that all persons are to be welcomed, but that same mandate also prohibits the church from condoning same-sex sexual behaviour.<sup>536</sup>

Cory was mindful of this when he said in his interview:

People don't want to feel as if the church is encouraging that lifestyle, they just want the church to help them deal with it. (Cory)

Compassion always involves a fusion between justice, truth and love, not just sentimental love. Looking at how Jesus treated the woman caught in adultery, he did not condone what she had been up to, he drew her attention to it and called it sin. He commanded her to go and sin no more, to go and change the way she was because she needs to change. Yet there is compassion because he kept her from being stoned to death.

Church is a place of discipline and growth and compassion at times is simply speaking the word of truth in love. Nevertheless, every person should be received with love and acceptance in the church from their Christian sister and brother. Church is where everyone is on this journey, struggling and hobbling along together, serving the church with all sorts of impediments, 'seeking to do God's will in the midst of the brokenness of life.'<sup>537</sup> Homosexuality is but one of the many things that church people struggle with. Practicing homosexuals or individuals with SSA who choose to attend church should not be made to feel undervalued, ostracised or treated as

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<sup>535</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 401.

<sup>536</sup> Grenz, p. 1.

<sup>537</sup> Grenz, p. 133.

outcasts. Persons in churches struggling with SSA should evoke our concern and understanding. The church's task is to provide a sense of hope, assisting each other towards wholeness and be reflectors of 'God's bountiful grace'<sup>538</sup> and compassion.

Being with men who are struggling with SSA, rather than correcting or imposing solutions, is the most appropriate pastoral response to those struggling with SSA. 'Being with' involves suspending judgement, sharing their struggle, praying with them, weeping with them, rejoicing with them, affirming their dignity and valuing those with SSA for who they are. 'Being with' opens up opportunities for listening, caring, learning and understanding what the experience means for those experiencing it. Jesus spent ninety percent of his life just being among the people of Nazareth, sharing their joys, hopes, struggles, grieves, disasters and triumphs.<sup>539</sup> He spent more time being with them than fixing their ills and solving their problems. I am committed to being with those who like the participants, struggle day by day with SSA and their commitment to sexual purity and need support. 'Being with', is seemingly the point where pastoral care and service to them should begin. It is important to note, 'God's whole life is shaped by the permanent resolve never to be except to *be with us*.'<sup>540</sup> With us, whoever we are and with whatever we are struggling with, this is supernatural support.

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<sup>538</sup> Grenz, p. 157.

<sup>539</sup> Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being With God* (Chichester: Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015), Amazon Kindle e-book, p.24.

<sup>540</sup> Wells, p.8.



## Chapter Six: Conclusion

This study set out to examine the research question ‘How do Black men struggling with same-sex attraction (SSA) and the teachings of Black Majority Churches (BMCs) describe and perceive their lived experiences?’ The main findings were as follows: 1) There is definite homophobia within the BMCs which affect how those with SSA are treated. 2) Feelings of unfairness in individuals with SSA stem from their struggle with the attitudes of the church and the struggle with their faith. 3) Lastly, there is an immense lack of support for those with SSA within the BMCs in the UK.

It was found that Black men in BMCs with SSA, experienced fear and isolation and perceived that the support characteristic to congregants, would be withheld from them because of homophobic views and attitudes. Therefore, it could be concluded that their struggle with SSA is magnified as a result. This suggests the need for BMCs to recognise and acknowledge the pervasive homophobic sentiments that exists within the church, the damage that is being done to individuals with SSA, and work toward changing the attitude. Identifying it and correcting it is paramount. Much has to be done to eliminate the fears of individuals who are struggling.

Homophobic remarks are common in some BMCs. Loud shouts of ‘amen’ resonate from the congregation when homosexuals are being lambasted and verbally abused during a sermon. Regrettably, the only regard I had as a BMC minister for homosexuals was to get them to change from being homosexuals. I never gave thought to the complexities of their situations. Persons with SSA in BMCs, are often subjected to immense pressure, fear and secrecy. They struggle behind the scenes, desperately trying to preserve their faith, protect their families, gain acceptance and measure up to the expectations of their church and Black community. They are worthy of liberation but remain enslaved in prisons of church sanctioned homophobia.

There are noticeable changes in the way homosexuality is viewed in society today. Nevertheless, there remains a fair amount of misinformation, prejudice and cultural presuppositions that need to be addressed. To address homophobia and procure

attitudinal change so much needed in BMCs, I suggest that we start with educating the leaders and the church community about homosexuality. The apparent lack of knowledge in BMCs regarding homosexuality was highlighted in this study and appeared to be a contributing factor to the way in which homosexual issues are dealt with. Education is one of the means for effecting change. Without making excuses, I realise that it is possible that some of the homophobic attitudes displayed are done out of ignorance and learned behaviour, without thinking of the harm and impact it could have on listeners. The startling similarity in the terminologies used by ministers of BMCs both here in the UK and in the USA as described by literature, by these men and witnessed by me in these interviews and in churches, has caused me to ponder whether in fact the severity of the language used in the pulpit indeed stems from a cultural/Black traditional standpoint. Seemingly, traditional religious or cultural communities tend to have a more conservative viewpoint when it comes to issues of sex and sexuality.

SSA comes with varying degrees of complexity. As a researcher and leader in a BMC I understand the growing need for the churches to develop a response to this. However, due to cultural attitudes to SSA not all leaders are as open to the dialogue. I believe this is due to fear of being seen as compromising on the purported biblical stance or the start of condoning homosexuality. Hopefully, greater knowledge and understanding of SSA and about individuals, will help to temper the language used by BMCs when pronouncing a doctrinal stance and proclaiming what they believe to be truth. Hurtful, harmful comments and terminologies should be avoided at all cost.

It was also found that the men thought that their struggle was unfair. Why Lord? they questioned. Why had God given them such feelings and then abandon them to figure out how to cope in a church predicated on struggle, yet fiercely opposed to this aspect of their lives? Therefore, it could be concluded that the BMC is marginalising a subset of its congregants due to homophobic theology and attitudes. Furthermore, the deep-rooted role that the BMC plays in the community and in Black families, means that the attitudes adopted by the BMC significantly moulds that of the Black community. It has had a significant impact on the mental and emotional well-being of the men. BMCs have an ethical responsibility to provide a means of

acknowledging the struggle of the men and to support them appropriately.

The BMC may philosophically say that it is a place for all people but in practicality it is not, as it was found that the men in this study had to remain hidden and silent in their struggle with their sexuality. The BMC is historically known as a place of refuge for Black people with struggles to turn to. It has provided both physical and emotional security for its congregants. It is not unreasonable to expect it to be a place that may accommodate disclosure of SSA. The fact that it is a place that evokes fear and represses disclosure calls for review of homophobic theology and actions. The BMC needs to be appropriate to the needs of members identified with a God and church for all.

Same-sex attracted church attendees are not accepted as heterosexual members are once their sexuality becomes known. BMCs need to become more impartial and just communities in regard to congregants with homosexual inclinations. The BMCs have an obligation to members with SSA to help them break the cycle of depression, deception, dishonesty, despair and to faithfully shepherd every person who comes to them for care. No child of God should feel worthless, remain in obscurity or abandon within the parameters of the BMC. If congregants with SSA are going to come out from under the veil of secrecy and voice their need for support, BMCs will have to rethink their attitudes and the way in which they deal with issues relating to homosexuality.

This study highlighted the need for pastoral care specific to Black men with SSA within the BMC. One thing I learned is that there needs to be a lot of very good, very supportive and very loving pastoral care, made available for individuals with SSA. Most of the ministers and leaders who took part in the study acknowledged that they were aware of or suspected that there were men in the church who were same-sex attracted. Albeit, all seventeen of them, some heads of organisations ranging from two to one hundred and two churches, indicated that there was nothing in place for supporting individuals in the churches with SSA. Unfortunately, support for Black men with SSA in BMCs is either not available or not openly visible.

Take the blinders from your vision, take the padding from your ears, and confess you've heard me crying, and admit you've seen my tears.<sup>541</sup>

These lines from Maya Angelou's poem, 'Equality', spoke volumes to me in the past as a Black woman, of society's false notion of equality regarding race and of the failings of human nature. Now the poem and the metaphors used in these lines resonate vividly with the lived experiences of the young men struggling with SSA in this study and the current situation within BMCs. As this study and others which I have commented on in the discussion have shown, we have become a church with struggling ones within our midst but have blinded ourselves to this fact mainly because of the nature of the struggle.

It was a young man's confrontational lament stating that the church had failed him in his struggle with SSA, and my failure to secure appropriate advice from fellow Black ministers to help him that prompted this study. I questioned and doubted whether the church was fully responsible. Listening to their stories and reading the interview transcripts I realised that their pain, hurts and fears were right in front of us, but we have covered our eyes with 'blinders' and stopped our hearing with 'paddings.' Preferring not to know we rather shield ourselves from the reality that there are men with homosexual tendencies in our congregations. This can no longer be the case. There must be a change.

I must admit, that my attitude at the start of the study and my attitude now is very different. I was rigid, very conservative and one track in my approach to homosexuality and people with homosexual feelings. However, I am no longer one of those who shout a resounding 'amen' in agreement with homophobic sentiments made by ministers against homosexuals in their sermons. As a matter of fact, I now tremble with disgust when I hear homophobic remarks made in or out of the pulpit. This study has shaped and formulated my thinking in ways that I did not expect it would. I am no longer silent when I see God's children are being oppressed in

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<sup>541</sup> Maya Angelou, *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* (London: Virago Press, 2015), Amazon Kindle e-book, pp.226-227.

unprecedented ways in the house of God. I now confront and challenge the behaviour. Listening to these men showed me how guilty we are at times of sending mixed messages. Countless times we invoke the hurting, broken and weary to lay down their burdens and to seek counsel. Yet the messages of fear and condemnation preached from the pulpit placed iron yokes around their necks.

Ministry should be constantly maturing and developing. Since this study, I have become a lot more sensitive in the way that I deliver my messages when speaking on topics regarding sexuality. I have become aware there are congregants who are hurting and wounded in our midst and our messages of love, encouragement and God's instructions can be delivered in a manner that does not further wound.

The findings of this study helped to show that the BMC is far behind in discussing its views in developing and in formulating a formal response regarding the issue of SSA. As a culture, we are quite closed when discussing the topic of sexuality. While listening to these men, I realised we have never truly come together as ministers and openly and honestly discuss our views and those of the BMCs' on SSA, and how to move the church forward in this ever-evolving society. Maybe like some others, I had taken the attitude that SSA was not 'our thing'. This issue is now on my list of priorities and I have already met with leaders of the BMC organisation that I am part of and have begun our discussions and searching for appropriate ways of supporting same-sex attracted individuals. I hope to take this further to other BMCs. The 'blindness' must come off so that we can help our church and the community as a whole.

The strong influence of the BMC on the lives of the participants was evident in this study. Their disheartenment at not being able to solicit help and support from the place that held such a primary place in their lives was undeniable. Getting support from the church may have ultimately led to them mustering up the courage to share their feelings with their families and thus widening the scope of their support system. An adequate much needed approach is required in order to best assist a population trying to live out their Christian faith while struggling with SSA.

If BMCs are to remain relevant, meaningful and continue to play salient roles in the UK Black communities and the society as a whole, they cannot afford not to engage with contemporary issues. Much damage is done by silence. It is crucial that the BMC acquire the skills, 'harness the historic resources that have informed and governed her existence'<sup>542</sup> in order to engage with and meet today's needs.

It was a difficult, long, but rewarding journey. 'There is mourning to be done with those who know pain or suffering and lack the power or freedom to bring it to speech.'<sup>543</sup> I mourn alongside these Black Christian men who daily coexist with the conflict and constant struggle with their feelings of homosexual attraction and the theology and rules they have been taught to adhere to. Consequently, the experiences of these men have caused me, a minister of over 40 years, to honestly consider the way BMCs approach and address the topic of same-sex attraction as well as reflect on my own ministry. The intention of this thesis is to give these men a voice, and hopefully in some way break through some of the barriers set before them.

Each of the participants, uniquely described their experience of struggling and allowed themselves to be vulnerable by subjecting themselves to interviews and by participating in a study of this nature. The enormity of this venture could only be understood in light of the ramifications that could result from having made such a decision. Their participation was motivated by passion for themselves, for others who are currently in their positions and for those who will come in the future. Due to their willingness to share, BMCs can access valuable data and information that might assist them to better understand the experiences of this population.

Thanks to these men, I have now learned to engage 'with' rather than 'to' the people God has placed in my care. It was never my intention to 'be with' individuals who are homosexually inclined but this study has changed that. I no longer view individuals with homosexual attractions as people requiring fixing or as people who should be shunned, but people worthy of love and mutual respect. It is anticipated that this research will add to the body of knowledge and as a resource for pastors, leaders and

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<sup>542</sup> Reddie, p. 134.

<sup>543</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p.119.

individuals of BMCs in the UK. I do not assume that this study will be able to put an end to these crucial and complex issues and one must abandon the temptation to offer simplistic 'solutions'. Nevertheless, I hope that my work will at least provoke new thinking about how BMCs can find compassionate and sensitive ways of supporting people with SSA. To this extent, I hope this study will challenge attitudes, stimulate new theological thinking and provoke action.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix I: Participant Information Sheet**

My name is Ruthlyn Bradshaw and I am a Doctoral student at Spurgeon's College which is accredited by the University of Chester.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study where I am seeking to find out the lived experiences of Black men in Black Majority Churches in the UK struggling with same-sex attraction and the teachings of their churches.

You have expressed your interest and have voluntarily agreed to participate in the research project by providing answers to questions posed in an interview (or providing answers to questions posed in a questionnaire). The semi-structured interview will last for approximately 40–50 minutes. The answers you provide as well as other information gathered will be used as part of my Doctor of Ministry research project. Your response to questions posed during the interview will be digitally recorded and will be listened to and transcribed by me only. Brief notes may also be taken by me during the interview which may also be part of the transcribed material used for the research.

I am required by the university to keep the data which I gather for a period of 10 years minimum. I assure you that it will be kept in a locked storage facility at all times and confidentiality will be maintained by means of a code or a fictitious name and destroyed at the end of the required period.

Your participation is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. Refusing to participate or withdrawal of consent will not lead to any adverse consequences.

Sharing your experiences may cause you some discomfort. I will be sensitive to your feelings and treat you with respect. Whilst I will be operating from the position of a researcher and cannot offer counselling, if you need or desire counselling I will give you information about counselling agencies whom you may contact.

You may decline from answering any question, and also to terminate the interview at any point. If you have a complaint while participating in the research it should be made in writing to the Dean of Academic Quality and Enhancement, Chester University.

The research project will be available for you to look at if you wish to do so.

Here is my email address and mobile phone number if you need to contact me at any time. Email: [REDACTED] Mobile: [REDACTED]



## **Appendix II: Consent Form**

My name is Ruthlyn Bradshaw and I am a Doctoral student at Spurgeon's College which is accredited by the University of Chester.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study where I am seeking to find out the lived experiences of Black men in Black Majority Churches in the UK struggling with same-sex attraction and the teachings of their churches.

Your participation is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. Refusing to participate or withdrawal of consent will not lead to any adverse consequences.

You may decline from answering any question and also to terminate the interview at any point. The answers you provide as well as other information gathered will be used as part of my Doctor of Ministry research project.

Please sign below if you have read and understood the participant information sheet, had the opportunity to ask questions, and you consent to participate in this research project as described and explained.

Signature ..... Date.....

Thank you for your participation.

### **Appendix III: Consent Form for Ministers Completing Questionnaire**

My name is Ruthlyn Bradshaw and I am a Doctoral student at Spurgeon's College which is accredited by the University of Chester.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study where I am seeking to find out the lived experiences of Black men in Black Majority Churches in the UK struggling with same-sex attraction and the teachings of their churches.

Your participation is totally voluntary and you are free to refrain from answering any question on this questionnaire.

Please sign below if you have read and understood the participant information sheet, had the opportunity to ask questions, and you consent to participate in this research project as described and explained.

Signature ..... Date.....

Thank you for your participation.

#### **Appendix IV: Interview Questions**

Age: (18- 25) (26-35) (36-45) (45-55) (over 55)

Do you attend a Black Majority Church? If so how long?

1. How do you describe yourself sexually?
2. What is your belief about homosexuality?
3. Please, would you reflect on your feelings and experiences about your own sexuality?
4. What does your church teach regarding homosexuality? What evidence do you have of this?
5. What is your understanding of Christian teaching in regards to homosexuality?
6. Would you feel able to discuss questions regarding homosexuality with your pastor?
  - a. If so have you done so?
  - b. What was your pastor's response?
7. Are you aware of any programme in your church that provides care for people with homosexual feelings? Do you get pastoral support from elsewhere?
8. What sort of support do you feel you need from your church to help you?
9. What would you like the church to know about men struggling to reconcile their personal sexuality with their Christian church context?

## Appendix V: Questionnaire Questions

Age: (18- 25) [ ] (26-35) [ ] (36-45) [ ] (45-55) [ ] (over 55) [ ]

1. How many Black Majority Churches (BMCs) are there in the organisation that you head up?  
Are you pastor of any of them?
2. What in your view is the predominant view of homosexuality in BMCs?
3. What are your views on Homosexuality?
4. How do you define yourself sexually?
5. In your experience are you aware that there are men in BMCs with homosexual feelings?  
How were you made aware?
6. How would you respond to a member of your congregation who tells you he has homoerotic feelings?
7. How do you understand Christian teaching in regards to homosexuality?
8. Is there any pastoral framework in your church or organisation which deals specifically with the needs of people with homosexual feelings?
9. Do you distinguish between men who claim they are struggling with homosexual feelings and men who openly declare that they are gay?  
If so what is the distinction?
10. Do you believe that the BMCs are homophobic in their teaching and preaching about homosexuality?
11. Some argue that the scriptures used in church to preach against homosexuality are being misinterpreted what are your views on this?
12. It is said that the Black Church adopts a 'don't ask don't tell' attitude and this has made it easy for homosexuals to remain hidden and operate in the church. Please write your views on this.

**Note:** These questions, with the word 'attend' replacing 'head up' in question 1 and the omission of question 4, were used on the questionnaire for Pastors and Leaders attending Spurgeon's College.

## **Appendix: VI Exhaustive Description**

### **The Exhaustive Description of the Lived Experiences of Black Men Struggling with SSA and the Teachings of BMCs.**

Experiencing SSA was immensely challenging for each participant. From the onset they dealt with feelings of unfairness, being different, not good enough and feeling abandoned, even by God who did not answer their prayer for deliverance. There was also the appeal for support because they were going it alone, and living in fear and trying to cope. They were seemingly forced to live with something that they did not want and even detested. SSA was likened to an annoying parasite, invasive and so intense that at times the participants felt as if they were losing their minds and even entertained thoughts about committing suicide.

The participants perceived that attraction to the opposite sex was what constituted normalcy. Yearning for normalcy, they watched pornographic images of girls and sought to have intimate relationship with women, all the while keeping their SSA hidden. They reckoned it would be a fate worse than death if their SSA was to become known. The consequences such as stigmatisation, discrimination, rejection and isolation as well as disappointing family and the church would be too much to bear. The fear of God's punishment also engendered a sense of vulnerability and personal distress.

They experienced negative feelings of worth, shame, guilt and self condemnation. They even distanced themselves emotionally from people, especially guys, and resorted to behaving in homophobic ways in order to avoid suspicion. These components, often associated with internalised homophobia, indicated that the participants had internalised negative attitudes and beliefs.

Church was one of the major importance in the participants' lives, but their desire to function and serve the church in the capacities that were available to them was hindered. Because they feared that the church community might ask about their sexuality and amongst other things, reject, ostracise and treat them differently. Seemingly, there was not much distinction made in BMCs between homosexual acts

and SSA. The participants believed that they were amongst the highest category of sinners and although there were homosexuals in the church holding prominent positions, they were operating under the 'don't ask don't tell' policy.

Participants were emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausted having to deal with their SSA in isolation. Their conditions were exacerbated further by the belief in some BMCs that homosexuality resulted from demonic possession. Several participants, already feeling dirty and messed up because of their SSA, had to also deal with the horrific thought that a demon might be living inside of them. In desperation one of them tried to vomit up the demon.

It is a pervasive struggle trying to live with SSA in a context that strongly condemns those feelings. The participants' commitments to the church's doctrine were thwarted with torment and distress because they could neither serve the church fully nor give expressions to their homoerotic feelings. They felt like hypocrites and phoney's living a double life in the church. Moreover, they were confused that on one hand God was blessing in unprecedented ways and on the other, strong same-sex desires bombarded their minds even during worship services.

Participants witnessed the manner in which the church dealt with matters similar to theirs in the past and felt it was to their benefit to keep their struggle hidden. However, it was painfully lonely for them not to be able to speak to family or to anyone in the church. It was awful, but seemingly, 'leave or lie' was the only recourse that was available to them.

The participants struggled with religious beliefs, cultural views and negative connotations that attacked their masculinity. Black men having SSA were considered to be effeminate and an embarrassment to the Black culture. Participants described the Black community as being less tolerant and even aggressive to Black men who displayed any sort of homosexual traits.

Several participants expected that their SSA would have been gone after they committed their lives to Christ. However, the SSA remained and this caused some of the participants to question the legitimacy of their salvation experience. They relied

on coping strategies such as keeping their SSA hidden, praying, fasting and putting safeguards in place to avoid undue temptation. Additionally, they confided in people who were also experiencing SSA.

Participants were in dire need of support and they perceived that the church should have been able to offer them a safe space, non-judgemental listening, empathic understanding, clear guidance, dialogue, acceptance and love. Apparently, there was no provision made for individuals in BMCs struggling with SSA and endeavouring to live chaste lives.

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